Paolo Bacigalupi: Pocketful of Dharma

Fantasy & Science Fiction

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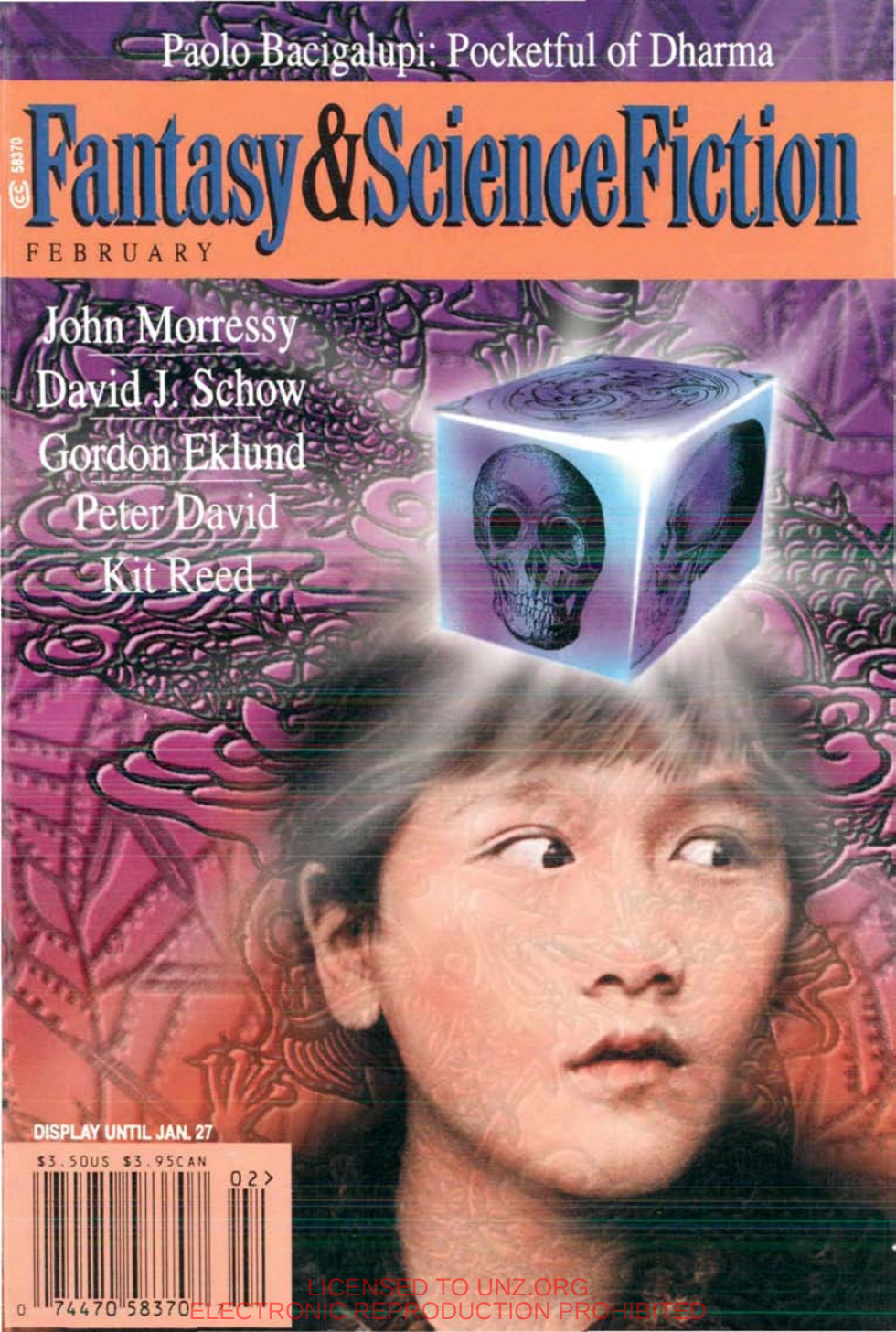

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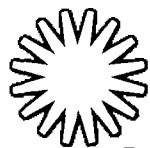

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Paolo Bacigalupi first went to China as a language student, and thus far he has spent about three cumulative years there (over various trips), working such jobs as a proofreader, a marketing director, and a door-to-door salesman. Nowadays, he lives in Denver, Colorado, and notes that he recently got married in "a fantastic Hindu ceremony."

This story marks his first professional sale, and his writing career seems to be off to a running start. The word on the street is that he's working on a novel related to this remarkable, inventive debut.

Pocketful of Dharma

By Paolo Bacigalupi

WANG JUN STOOD ON THE rain-slicked streets of old Chengdu and stared up into the drizzle at Huojianzhu.

It rose into the evening darkness, a massive city core, dwarfing even Chengdu's skyscrapers. Construction workers dangled from its rising skeleton, swinging from one section of growth to the next on long rappelling belts. Others clambered unsecured, digging their fingers into the honeycomb structure, climbing the struts with careless dangerous ease. Soon the growing core would overwhelm the wet-tiled roofs of the old city. Then Huojianzhu, the Living Architecture, would become Chengdu entirely.

It grew on lattices of minerals, laying its own skeleton and following with cellulose skin. Infrastructure strong and broad, growing and branching, it settled roots deep into the green fertile soil of the Sichuan basin. It drew nutrients and minerals from the soil and sun, and the water of the rancid Bing Jiang; sucking at pollutants as willingly as it ate the sunlight which filtered through twining sooty mist.

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Within, its veins and arteries grew pipelines to service the waste and food and data needs of its coming occupants. It was an animal vertical city built first in the fertile minds of the Biotects and now growing into reality. Energy pulsed from the growing creature. It would stand a kilometer high and five wide when fully mature. A vast biologic city, which other than its life support would then lie dormant as humanity walked its hollowed arteries, clambered through its veins and nailed memories to its skin in the rituals of habitation.

Wang Jun watched Huojianzhu and dreamed in his small beggar-boy mind of ways and means that might lead him out of the wet streets and hunger and into its comforts. Already sections of it glowed with habitation. People, living high and far above him, roamed the organism's corridors. Only the powerful and wealthy would live so high above. Those with *guanxi*. Connections. Influence.

His eyes sought the top of the core, through the darkness and rain and mist, but it disappeared long before his eyes could find it. He wondered if the people up high saw the stars while he saw only drizzle. He had heard that if one cut Huojianzhu, its walls would bleed. Some said it cried. He shivered at the rising creature and turned his eyes back to earth to continue pushing with his stick-thin limbs and bent posture through the Chengdu crowds.

Commuters carried black umbrellas or wore blue and yellow plastic ponchos to protect them from the spitting rain. His own hair lay soaked, slicked to the contours of his skull. He shivered and cast about himself, seeking hard for likely marks, so that he nearly tripped over the Tibetan.

The man squatted on the wet pavement with clear plastic covering his wares. Soot and sweat grimed his face, so that his features sheened black and sticky under the harsh halogen glare of the street lamps. The warped and jagged stumps of his teeth showed as he smiled. He pulled a desiccated tiger claw from under the plastic and waved it in Wang Jun's face.

"You want tiger bones?" He leered. "Good for virility."

Wang Jun stopped short before the waving amputated limb. Its owner was long dead so that only the sinews and ragged fur and the bone remained, dried and stringy. He stared at the relic and reached out to touch the jerky tendons and wickedly curving yellowed claws.

The Tibetan jerked it away and laughed again. There was a tarnished

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silver ring on his finger, studded with chunks of turquoise; a snake twining around his finger and swallowing its tail endlessly.

"You can't afford to touch." He ground phlegm and spit on the pavement beside him, leaving a pool of yellow mucus shot through with the black texturing of Chengdu's air.

"I can," said Wang Jun.

"What have you got in your pockets?"

Wang Jun shrugged and the Tibetan laughed. "You have nothing, you stunted little boy. Come back when you've got something in your pockets."

He waved his goods of virility at the interested, more moneyed buyers who had gathered. Wang Jun slipped back into the crowd.

It was true what the Tibetan said. He had nothing in his pockets. He had a ratted wool blanket hidden in a Stone-Ailixin cardboard box, a broken VTOL Micro-Machine, and a moldering yellow woolen school hat.

He had come from the green-terraced hills of the countryside with less than that. Already twisted and scarred with the passage of plague, he had come to Chengdu with empty hands and empty pockets and the recollections of a silent dirt village where no thing lived. His body carried recollections of pain so deep that it remained permanently crouched in a muscular memory of that agony.

He had had nothing in his pockets then and he had nothing in his pockets now. It might have bothered him if he had ever known anything but want. Anything but hunger. He could resent the Tibetan's dismissal no more than he might resent the neon logos which hung from the tops of towers and illuminated the pissing rain with flashing reds, yellows, blues, and greens. Electric colors filled the darkness with hypnotic rhythms and glowing dreams. Red Pagoda Cigarettes, Five Star Beer, Shizi Jituan Software, and Heaven City Banking Corporation. Confucius Jiajiu promised warm rice wine comfort while JinLong Pharmaceuticals guaranteed long life, and it all lay beyond him.

He hunkered in a rain-slicked doorway, with his twisted bent back and empty pockets and emptier stomach and wide-open eyes looking for the mark who would feed him tonight. The glowing promises hung high above him, more connected to those people who lived in the skyscrapers: people with cash and officials in their pockets. There was nothing up there

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he knew or understood. He coughed, and cleared the black mucus from his throat. The streets, he knew. Organic rot and desperation, he understood. Hunger, he felt rumbling in his belly.

He watched covetously as people walked past and he called out to them in a polyglot of Mandarin, Chengdu dialect, and the only English words he knew, "Give me money. Give me money." He tugged at their umbrellas and yellow ponchos. He stroked their designer sleeves and powdered skin until they relented and gave money. Those who broke away, he spat upon. The angry ones who seized him, he bit with sharp yellow teeth.

Foreigners were few now in the wet. Late October hurried them homeward, back to their provinces, homes, and countries. Leaner times lay ahead, lean enough that he worried about his future and counted the crumpled paper the people threw to him. He held tight the light aluminum *jiao* coins people tossed. The foreigners always had paper money and often gave, but they grew too few.

He scanned the street, then picked at a damp chip of concrete on the ground. In Huojianzhu, it was said, they used no concrete to build. He wondered what the floors would feel like, the walls. He dimly remembered his home from before he came to Chengdu, a house made of mud, with a dirt floor. He doubted the city core was made of the same. His belly grew emptier. Above him, a video loop of Lu Xieyan, a Guangdong singer, exhorted the people on the street to strike down the Three Wrongs of Religion: Dogmatism, Terrorism, and Splittism. He ignored her screeching indictments and scanned the crowds again.

A pale face bobbed in the flow of Chinese. A foreigner, but he was a strange one. He neither pushed ahead with a purpose, nor gawked about himself at Chengdu's splendors. He seemed at home on the alien street. He wore a black coat which stretched to the ground. It was shiny, so it reflected the reds and blues of neon, and the flash of the street lamps. The patterns were hypnotic.

Wang Jun slid closer. The man was tall, two meters high, and he wore dark glasses so that his eyes were hidden. Wang Jun recognized the glasses and was sure the man saw clearly from behind the inky ovals. Microfibers in the lenses stole the light and amplified and smoothed it so that the man saw day, even as he hid his eyes from others in the night.

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Wang Jun knew the glasses were expensive and knew Three-Fingers Gao would buy them if he could steal them. He watched the man and waited as he continued up the street with his assured, arrogant stride. Wang Jun trailed him, stealthy and furtive. When the man turned into an alley and disappeared, Wang Jun rushed to follow.

He peeked into the alley's mouth. Buildings crowded the passageway's darkness. He smelled excrement and dead things moldering. He thought of the Tibetan's tiger claw, dried and dead, with pieces nicked away from the bone and tendons where customers had selected their weight of virility. The foreigner's footsteps echoed and splashed in the darkness; the even footsteps of a man who saw in the dark. Wang Jun slid in after him, crouching and feeling his way blindly. He touched the roughness of the walls. Instant concrete. Stroking the darkness, he followed the receding footsteps.

Whispers broke the dripping stillness. Wang Jun smiled in the darkness, recognizing the sound of a trade. Did the foreigner buy girls? Heroin? So many things for a foreigner to buy. He settled still, to listen.

The whispers grew heated and terminated in a brief yelp of surprise. Someone gagged and then there was a rasping and a splash. Wang Jun trembled and waited, as still as the concrete to which he pressed his body.

The words of his own country echoed, "*Kai deng ba.*" Wang Jun's ears pricked at a familiar accent. A light flared and his eyes burned under the sharp glare. When his sight adjusted he stared into the dark eyes of the Tibetan street hawker. The Tibetan smiled slowly showing the encrustations of his teeth and Wang Jun stumbled back, seeking escape.

The Tibetan captured Wang Jun with hard efficiency. Wang Jun bit at the Tibetan's hands and fought, but the Tibetan was quick and he pressed Wang Jun against the wet concrete ground so that all Wang Jun could see were two pairs of boots; the Tibetan's and a companion's. He struggled, then let his body lie limp, understanding the futility of defiance.

"So, you're a fighter," the Tibetan said, and held him down a moment longer to make his lesson clear. Then he hauled Wang Jun upright. His hand clamped painfully at Wang Jun's nape. "*Ni shi shei*?" he asked.

Wang Jun trembled and whined, "No one. A beggar. No one."

The Tibetan looked more closely at him and smiled. "The ugly boy with the empty pockets. Do you want the tiger's claw after all?"

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"I don't want anything."

"You will receive nothing," said the Tibetan's companion. The Tibetan smirked. Wang Jun marked the new speaker as Hunanese by his accent.

The Hunanese asked, "What is your name?"

"Wang Jun."

"Which *'Jun'*?"

Wang Jun shrugged. "I don't know."

The Hunanese shook his head and smiled. "A farmer's boy," he said. "What do you plant? Cabbage? Rice?" He laughed. "The Sichuanese are ignorant. You should know how to write your name. I will assume that your 'Jun' is for soldier. Are you a soldier?"

Wang Jun shook his head. "I'm a beggar."

"Soldier Wang, the beggar? No. That won't do. You are simply Soldier Wang." He smiled. "Now tell me, Soldier Wang, why are you here in this dangerous dark alley in the rain?"

Wang Jun swallowed. "I wanted the foreigner's dark glasses."

"Did you?"

Wang Jun nodded.

The Hunanese stared into Wang Jun's eyes, then nodded. "All right, Little Wang. Soldier Wang," he said. "You may have them. Go over there. Take them if you are not afraid." The Tibetan's grip relaxed and Wang Jun was free.

He looked and saw where the foreigner lay, face down in a puddle of water. At the Hunanese's nod, he edged closer to the still body, until he stood above it. He reached down and pulled at the big man's hair until his face rose dripping from the water, and his expensive glasses were accessible. Wang Jun pulled the glasses from the corpse's face and laid its head gently back into the stagnant pool. He shook water from the glasses and the Hunanese and Tibetan smiled.

The Hunanese crooked a finger, beckoning.

"Now, Soldier Wang, I have a mission for you. The glasses are your payment. Put them in your pocket. Take this," a blue datacube appeared in his hand, "and take it to the Renmin Lu bridge across the Bing Jiang. Give it to the person who wears white gloves. That one will give you something extra for your pocket." He leaned conspiratorially closer,

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encircling Wang Jun's neck and holding him so that their noses pressed together and Wang Jun could smell his stale breath. "If you do not deliver this, my friend will hunt you down and see you die."

The Tibetan smiled.

Wang Jun swallowed and nodded, closing the cube in his small hand. "Go then, Soldier Wang. Dispense your duty." The Hunanese released his neck, and Wang Jun plunged for the lighted streets, with the datacube clutched tight in his hand.

The pair watched him run.

The Hunanese said, "Do you think he will survive?"

The Tibetan shrugged. "We must trust that Palden Lhamo will protect and guide him now."

"And if she does not?"

"Fate delivered him to us. Who can say what fate will deliver him? Perhaps no one will search a beggar child. Perhaps we both will be alive tomorrow to know."

"Or perhaps in another turning of the Wheel."

The Tibetan nodded.

"And if he accesses the data?"

The Tibetan sighed and turned away. "Then that too will be fate. Come, they will be tracking us."

THE BING JIANG ran like an oil slick under the bridge, black and sluggish. Wang Jun perched on the bridge's railing, soot-stained stone engraved with dragons and phoenixes cavorting through clouds. He looked down into the river and watched styrofoam shreddings of packing containers float lazily on the thick surface of the water. Trying to hit a carton, he hawked phlegm and spat. He missed, and his mucus joined the rest of the river's effluent. He looked at the cube again. Turning it in his hands as he had done several times before as he waited for the man with the white gloves. It was blue, with the smoothness of all highly engineered plastics. Its texture reminded him of a tiny plastic chair he had once owned. It had been a brilliant red but smooth like this. He had begged from it until a stronger boy took it.

Now he turned the blue cube in his hands, stroking its surface and

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probing its black data jack with a speculative finger. He wondered if it might be more valuable than the glasses he now wore. Too large for his small head, they kept slipping down off his nose. He wore them anyway, delighted by the novelty of day-sight in darkness. He pushed the glasses back up on his nose and turned the cube again.

He checked for the man with white gloves and saw none. He turned the cube in his hands. Wondering what might be on it that would kill a foreigner.

The man with white gloves did not come.

Wang Jun coughed and spit again. If the man did not come before he counted ten large pieces of styrofoam, he would keep the cube and sell it.

Twenty styrofoam pieces later, the man with white gloves had not come, and the sky was beginning to lighten. Wang Jun stared at the cube. He considered throwing it in the water. He waited as *nongmin* began filtering across the bridge with their pull-carts laden with produce. Peasants coming in from the countryside, they leaked into the city from the wet fertile fields beyond, with mud between their toes and vegetables on their backs. Dawn was coming. Huojianzhu glistened, shining huge and alive against a lightening sky. He coughed and spit again and hopped off the bridge. He dropped the datacube in a ragged pocket. The Tibetan wouldn't be able to find him anyway.

Sunlight filtered through the haze of the city. Chengdu absorbed the heat. Humidity oozed out of the air, a freak change in temperature, a last wave of heat before winter came on. Wang Jun sweated. He found Three-Fingers Gao in a game room. Gao didn't really have three fingers. He had ten, and he used them all as he controlled a three-dimensional soldier through the high mountains of Tibet against the rebellion. He was known in Chengdu's triad circles as the man who had made TexTel's Chief Rep pay 10,000 yuan a month in protection money until he rotated back to Singapore. Because of the use of three fingers.

Wang Jun tugged Three-Fingers's leather jacket. Distracted, Three-Fingers died under an onslaught of staff-wielding monks.

He scowled at Wang Jun. "What?"

"I got something to sell."

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"I don't want any of those boards you tried to sell me before. I told you, they're no good without the hearts."

Wang Jun said, "I got something else."

"What?"

He held out the glasses and Three-Fingers's eyes dilated. He feigned indifference. "Where did you get those?"

"Found them."

"Let me see."

Wang Jun released them to Three-Fingers reluctantly. Three-Fingers put them on, then took them off and tossed them back at Wang Jun. "I'll give you twenty for them." He turned back to start another game.

"I want one hundred."

"*Mei me'er.*" He used Beijing slang. No way. He started the game. His soldier squatted on the plains, with snowy peaks rising before him. He started forward, pushing across short grasses to a hut made of the skin of earlier Chinese soldiers. Wang Jun watched and said, "Don't go in the hut."

"I know."

"I'll take fifty."

Three-Fingers snorted. His soldier spied horsemen approaching and moved so that the hut hid him from their view. "I'll give you twenty."

Wang Jun said, "Maybe BeanBean will give me more."

"I'll give you thirty, go see if BeanBean will give you that." His soldier waited until the horsemen clustered. He launched a rocket into their center. The game machine rumbled as the rocket exploded.

"You have thirty now?"

Three-Fingers turned away from his game and his soldier perished quickly as bio-engineered yakmen boiled out of the hut. He ignored the screams of his soldier as he counted out the cash to Wang Jun. Wang Jun left Three-Fingers to his games and celebrated the sale by finding an unused piece of bridge near the Bing Jiang. He settled down to nap under it through the sweltering afternoon heat.

He woke in the evening and he was hungry. He felt the heaviness of coins in his pocket and thought on the possibilities of his wealth. Among the coins, his fingers touched the unfamiliar shape of the data cube. He took it out and turned it in his hands. He had nearly forgotten the origin

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of his money. Holding the data cube, he was reminded of the Tibetan and the Hunanese and his mission. He considered seeking out the Tibetan and returning it to him, but deep inside he held a suspicion that he would not find the man selling tiger bones tonight. His stomach rumbled. He dropped the datacube back into his pocket and jingled the coins it resided with. Tonight he had money in his pockets. He would eat well.

"How much for *mapo dofu*?"

The cook looked at him from where he stood, swirling a soup in his broad wok, and listening to it sizzle.

"Too expensive for you, Little Wang. Go and find somewhere else to beg. I don't want you bothering my customers."

"*Shushu*, I have money." Wang Jun showed him the coins. "And I want to eat."

The cook laughed. "*Xiao* Wang is rich! Well then, Little Wang, tell me what you care for."

"*Mapo dofu*, *yu xiang* pork, two *liang* of rice and *Wu Xing* beer." His order tumbled out in a rush.

"Little Wang has a big stomach! Where will you fit all that food, I wonder?" When Wang Jun glared at him he said, "Go, sit, you'll have your feast."

Wang Jun went and sat at a low table and watched as the fire roared and the cook threw chiles into the wok to fry. He wiped at his mouth to keep from drooling as the smell of the food came to his nose. The cook's wife opened a bottle of Five Star for him, and he watched as she poured the beer into a wet glass. The day's heat was dissipating. Rain began to spatter the street restaurant's burlap roof. Wang Jun drank from his beer and watched the other diners, taking in the food they ate and the company they kept. These were people he might have previously harassed for their money. But not tonight. Tonight he was a king. Rich, with money in his pocket.

His thoughts were broken by the arrival of a foreigner. A broad man with long white hair pulled back in a horse's tail. His skin was pale and he wore white gloves. He stepped under the sheltering burlap and cast alien blue eyes across the diners. The Chinese at their tables stared back. When his eyes settled on Wang Jun's bent form, he smiled. He went to

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squat on a stool across from Wang Jun and said, in accented Mandarin, "You are Little Wang. You have something for me."

Wang Jun stared at the man and then, feeling cocky with the attention of the other Chinese said, "*Ke neng.*" Maybe.

The foreigner frowned, then leaned across the table. The cook's wife came, interrupting, and set down Wang Jun's *mapo dofu*, followed quickly by the pork. She went and scooped out a steaming bowl of rice, broader than Wang Jun's hand and set it before him. Wang Jun picked up chopsticks and began shoveling the food into his mouth, all the while watching the foreigner. His eyes watered at the spiciness of the *dofu* and his mouth tingled with the familiar numbing of ground peppercorns.

The wife asked if the foreigner would eat with him, and Wang Jun eyed the foreigner. He felt the money in his pocket, while his mouth flamed on. He looked at the size of the foreigner and assented reluctantly, feeling his wealth now inadequate. They spoke in *Chengdu hua*, the dialect of the city, so that the foreigner did not understand what they said. The man watched as the wife scooped another bowl of rice and set it in front of him with a pair of chopsticks. He looked down at the white mountain of rice in his bowl and then looked up at Wang Jun. He shook his head, and said, "You have something for me. Give it to me now."

Wang Jun was stung by the foreigner's disregard of the offered food. Because he was unhappy he said, "Why should I give it to you?"

The pale white man frowned and his blue eyes were cold and angry. "Did not the Tibetan tell you to give me something?" He held out a white-gloved hand.

Wang Jun shrugged. "You didn't come to the bridge. Why should I give it to you now?"

"Do you have it?"

Wang Jun became guarded. "No."

"Where is it?"

"I threw it away."

The man reached across the small table and grasped Wang Jun's ragged collar. He pulled him close. "Give it to me now. You are very small, I can take it or you can give it to me. Little Wang, you cannot win tonight. Do not test me."

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Wang Jun stared at the foreigner and saw silver flash in the man's breast pocket. On impulse he reached for the glint of sliver and drew a thing up until it was between their two faces. Other people at nearby tables gasped at what Wang Jun held. Wang Jun's hand began to shake, quivering uncontrollably, until the Tibetan's severed finger, with its tarnished silver and turquoise ring still on it, slipped from his horrified grasp and landed in the *yuxiang* pork.

The foreigner smiled, an indifferent, resigned smile. He said, "Give me the datacube before I collect a trophy from you as well." Wang Jun nodded and slowly reached into his pocket. The foreigner's eyes followed his reaching hand.

Wang Jun's free hand reached desperately out to the table and grabbed a handful of scalding *dofu* from its plate. Before the man could react, he drove the contents, full of hot chiles and peppercorns, into those cold blue eyes. As the foreigner howled, Wang Jun sank his sharp yellow teeth into the pale flesh of imprisoning hands. The foreigner dropped Wang Jun to rub frantically at his burning eye sockets, and blood flowed from his damaged hands.

Wang Jun took his freedom and ran for the darkness and alleys he knew best, leaving the foreigner still roaring behind him.

The rain was heavier, and the chill was coming back on Chengdu, harder and colder than before. The concrete and buildings radiated cold, and Wang Jun's breath misted in the air. He hunched in his box, with its logo for Stone-Ailixin Computers on the side. He thought it had been used for satellite phones, from the pictures below the logo. He huddled inside it with the remains of his childhood.

He could still remember the countryside he had come from and, vaguely, a mud-brick home. More clearly, he remembered terrace-sculpted hills and running along those terraces. Playing in warm summer mud with a Micro-Machine VTOL in his hands while his parents labored in brown water around their ankles and green rice shoots sprouted up out of the muck. Later, he had passed those same terraces, lush and unharvested as he made his way out of his silent village.

Under the cold instant-concrete shadows of the skyscrapers, he stroked his toy VTOL. The wings which folded up and down had broken

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off and were lost. He turned it over, looking at its die-cast steel frame. He pulled out the datacube and stared at it. Weighed the toy and the cube in his hands. He thought of the Tibetan's finger, severed with its silver snake ring still on it, and shuddered. The white man with the blue eyes would be looking for him. He looked around at his box. He put the Micro-Machine in his pocket but left his ratted blanket. He took his yellow *anchuan maozi*, the traffic safety hat children wore to and from school, stolen from a child even smaller than he. He pulled the yellow wool cap down over his ears, re-pocketed the datacube, and left without looking back.

THREE-FINGERS was crooning karaoke in a bar when Wang Jun found him. A pair of women with smooth skins and hard empty eyes attended him. They wore red silk *chipao*, styled from Shanghai. The collars were high and formal, but the slits in the dresses went nearly to the women's waists. Three-Fingers glared through the dim red smoky light when Wang Jun approached.

"What?"

"Do you have a computer that reads these?" He held up the datacube.

Three-Fingers stared at the cube and reached out for it. "Where did you get that?"

Wang Jun held it out but did not release it. "Off someone."

"Same place you got those glasses?"

"Maybe."

Three-Fingers peered at the datacube. "It's not a standard datacube. See the pins on the inside?" Wang Jun looked at the datasocket. "There's only three pins. You need an adapter to read whatever's on there. And you might not even be able to read it then. Depends what kind of OS it's designed for."

"What do I do?"

"Give it to me."

"No." Wang Jun backed off a step.

One of the women giggled at the interaction between the mini mob boss and street urchin. She stroked Three-Fingers's chest. "Don't worry about the *taofanzhe*. Pay attention to us." She giggled again.

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Wang Jun glared. Three-Fingers pushed the hostess off him. "Go away." She made an exaggerated pout, but left with her companion.

Three-Fingers held out his hand. "Let me see it. I can't help you if you don't let me see the *tamade* thing."

Wang Jun frowned but passed the datacube over. Three-Fingers turned it over in his hands. He peered into the socket, then nodded. "It's for HuangLong OS." He tossed it back and said, "It's a medical specialty OS. They use it for things like brain surgery, and DNA mapping. That's pretty specialized. Where'd you get it?"

Wang Jun shrugged. "Someone gave it to me."

"*Fang pi.*" Bullshit.

Wang Jun was silent and they regarded each other, then Three-Fingers said, "*Xing*, I'll buy it off you. Just because I'm curious. I'll give you five yuan. You want to sell it?"

Wang Jun shook his head.

"Fine. Ten yuan, but that's all."

Wang Jun shook his head again.

Three-Fingers Gao frowned. "Did you get rich, suddenly?"

"I don't want to sell it. I want to know what's on it."

"Well, that makes two of us now." They regarded each other for a time longer. Three-Fingers said, "All right. I'll help you. But if there's any value to what's on that, I'm taking three quarters on the profit."

"*Yi ban.*"

Three-Fingers rolled his eyes. "Fine. Half, then."

"Where are we going?"

Three-Fingers walked fast through chill mist. He led Wang Jun into smaller and smaller alleys. The buildings changed in character from shining modern glass and steel to mud-brick with thatched and tiled roofs. The streets became cobbled and jagged and old women stared out at them from dark wooden doorways. Wang Jun watched the old ladies with suspicion. Their eyes followed him impassively, recording his and Three-Fingers's passage.

Three-Fingers stopped to pull out a box of Red Pagodas. He put one in his mouth. "You smoke?"

Wang Jun took the offered stick and leaned close as Three-Fingers

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struck a match. It flared high and yellow and then sank low under the pressure of the wet air. Wang Jun drew hard on the cigarette and blew smoke. Three-Fingers lit his own.

"Where are we going?"

Three-Fingers shrugged. "Here." He jerked his head at the building behind them. He smoked for a minute longer, then dropped his cigarette on the damp cobbles and ground it out with a black boot. "Put out your smoke. It's bad for the machines." Wang Jun flicked the butt against a wall. It threw off red sparks where it bounced and then lay smoking on the ground. Three-Fingers pushed open a wooden door. Its paint was peeling and its frame warped so that he shoved hard and the door scraped loudly as they entered.

In the dim light of the room, Wang Jun could see dozens of monitors. They glowed with screen savers and data. He saw columns of characters and numbers, scrolling, connected to distant networks of information. People sat at the monitors in a silence broken only by the sound of the keys being pressed at an incessant rate.

Three-Fingers pulled Wang Jun up to one of the silent technicians and said, "He Dan, can you read this?" He nudged Wang Jun and Wang Jun held up the datacube. He Dan plucked it out of Wang Jun's hand with spidery graceful fingers and brought it close to his eyes in the dimness. With a shrug he began to sort through a pile of adapters. He chose one and connected it to a stray cord, then inserted the adapter into the datacube. He typed on the computer and the borders and workspaces flickered and changed color. A box appeared and he hit a single key in response.

"Where am I?" The voice was so loud that the speakers distorted and crackled. The technicians all jumped as their silence was shattered. He Dan adjusted a speaker control. The voice came again, softer. "Hello?" It held an edge of fear. "Is there anyone there?" it asked.

"Yes," said Wang Jun, impulsively.

"Where am I?" the voice quavered.

"In a computer," said Wang Jun.

Three-Fingers slapped him on the back of the head. "Be quiet."

"What?" said the voice.

They listened silently.

"Hello, did someone say I was in a computer?" it said.

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Wang Jun said, "Yes, you're in a computer. What are you?"

"I'm in a computer?" The voice was puzzled. "I was having surgery. How am I in a computer?"

"Who are you?" Wang Jun ignored Three-Fingers's glowering eyes.

"I am Naed Delhi, the 19th Dalai Lama. Who are you?"

The typing stopped. No one spoke. Wang Jun heard the faint whine of cooling fans and the high resonances of the monitors humming. Technicians turned to stare at the trio and the computer which spoke. Outside Wang Jun heard someone clear their throat of phlegm and spit. The computer spoke on, heedless of the effect of its words. "Hello?" it said. "Who am I speaking to?"

"I'm Wang Jun."

"Hello. Why can't I see?"

"You're in a computer. You don't have any eyes."

"I can hear. Why can I hear and yet not see?"

He Dan broke in, "Video input is not compatible with the software emulator which runs your program."

"I don't understand."

"You are an artificial intelligence construct. Your consciousness is software. Your input comes from hardware. They are incompatible on the system we have installed you."

The voice quavered, "I am not software. I am the Dalai Lama of the Yellow Hat sect. The 19th to be reincarnated as such. It is not my fate to be reincarnated as software. You are probably mistaken."

"Are you really the Dalai Lama?" Wang Jun asked.

"Yes," the computer said.

"How — " Wang Jun began, but Three-Fingers pulled him away from the system before he could phrase his question. He knelt in front of Wang Jun. His hands were shaking as he held Wang Jun by the collar of his shirt. Their faces nearly touched as he hissed out, "Where did you find this cube?"

Wang Jun shrugged. "Someone gave it to me."

Three-Finger's hand blurred and struck Wang Jun's face. Wang Jun jerked at its impact. His face burned. The technicians watched as Three-Fingers hissed, "Don't lie to me. Where did you find this thing?"

Wang Jun touched his face, "From a Tibetan, I got it from a Tibetan

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who sold tiger bones, and a man from Hunan. And there was a body. A big foreigner. They were his glasses I sold you."

Three-Fingers tilted his head back to stare at the ceiling. "Don't lie to me. Do you know what it means if we've got the Dalai Lama on a datacube that you've been carrying around in your pocket?" He shook Wang Jun. "Do you know what it means?"

Wang Jun whined, "I was supposed to give it to a man with white gloves, but he never came. And there was another man. A foreigner and he killed the Tibetan and took his finger, and he wanted mine too, and I ran and — " his voice rose in a babbling whine.

Three-Fingers's hands settled around Wang Jun's neck and squeezed until Wang Jun's ears rang and blackness scudded across his eyes. Distantly, he heard Three-Fingers say, "Don't cry to me. I'm not your mother. I'll take your tongue out if you make my life any more difficult than it already is. Do you understand?"

Wang Jun nodded in his haze.

Three-Fingers released him, saying, "Good. Go talk to the computer." Wang Jun breathed deeply and stumbled back to the Dalai Lama.

"How did you get inside the computer?" he asked.

"How do you know I am in a computer?"

"Because we plugged your datacube in and then you started talking."

The computer was silent.

"What's it like in there?" Wang Jun tried.

"Terrible and still," said the computer. Then it said, "I was going to have surgery, and now I am here."

"Did you dream?"

"I don't remember any dreams."

"Are you leading a rebellion against my homeland?"

"You speak Chinese. Are you from China?"

"Yes. Why are you making people fight in Tibet?"

"Where is this computer?"

"Chengdu."

"Oh, my. A long way from Bombay," the computer whispered.

"You came from Bombay?"

"I was having surgery in Bombay."

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"Is it lonely in there?"

"I don't remember anything until now. But it is very still here. Deathly still. I can hear you, but cannot feel anything. There is nothing here. I fear that I am not here. It is maddening. All of my senses are lost. I want out of this computer. Help me. Take me back to my body." The computer's voice, vibrating from the speakers, was begging.

"We can sell him," Three-Fingers said abruptly.

Wang Jun stared at Three-Fingers. "You can't sell him."

"Someone wants him if they're chasing you. We can sell him."

The computer said, "You can't sell me. I have to get back to Bombay. I'm sure my surgery can't be completed if I'm not there. I must go back. You must take me back."

Wang Jun nodded in agreement. Three-Fingers smirked. He Dan said, "We need to unplug him. Without some form of stimuli he may go crazy before you can decide what to do with him."

"Wait," said the Dalai Lama. "Please don't unplug me yet. I'm afraid. I'm afraid of being gone again."

"Unplug him," said Three-Fingers.

"Wait," said the computer. "You must listen to me. If my body is dead, you must destroy this computer you keep me in. I fear that I will not reincarnate. Even Palden Lhamo may not be able to find my soul. She is powerful, but though she rides across an ocean of blood astride the skin of her traitorous son, she may not find me. My soul will be trapped here, unnaturally preserved, even as my body decomposes. Promise me, please. You must not leave me — "

He Dan shut off the computer.

Three-Fingers raised his eyebrows at He Dan.

He Dan shrugged. "It could be that it is the Dalai Lama. If there are people chasing the beggar-child, it lends credence to its claims. It would not be hard to upload his identity matrix while he was undergoing surgery."

"Who would do that?"

He Dan shrugged. "He is at the center of so many different political conflicts, it would be impossible to say. In a datacube, he makes a convenient hostage. Tibetan extremists, Americans, us, perhaps the EU; they would all be interested in having such a hostage."

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Three-Fingers said, "If I'm going to sell him, I'll need to know who put him in there."

He Dan nodded, and then the door exploded inward. Splinters of wood flew about and shafts of light illuminated the dim room. Outside there was a whine of VTOLs and then there were bright lights lancing through the door, followed by the rapid thud of heavy boots. Wang Jun ducked instinctively as something seemed to suck the air out of the room and the monitors exploded, showering glass on the technicians and Wang Jun. People were shouting everywhere around him and Wang Jun smelled smoke. He stood up and pulled the datacube out of its adapter and rolled underneath a table as a barrage of pellets ratcheted across the wall above him.

He saw Three-Fingers fumble with something at his belt and then stiffen as red blossoms appeared on his chest. Other technicians were falling, all of them sprouting bloody stains on their bodies. Wang Jun huddled deeper under the table as forms in black armor came through the door. He put the datacube in his mouth, thinking he might swallow it before they could find him. More explosions came and suddenly the wall beside him was gone in a cacophony of bricks and rubble. He scrambled over the collapsed wall as shouts filled the air. Hunched low and running, he became nothing except a small child shadow. An irrelevant shadow in the rain and the play of lights from the troops left behind.

HE CROUCHED in a doorway's shadow, turning the datacube in his hands, stroking its blue plastic surface with reverential fascination. Rain fell in a cold mist and his nose dripped with the accumulated moisture. He shivered. The datacube was cold. He wondered if the Dalai Lama felt anything inside. People walked along the side-street, ignoring his small shadow in the doorway. They rose as forms out of the mist, became distinct and individual under the streetlamps and then disappeared back into shadows.

He had seen the VTOLs rise from a distance, their running lights illuminating their forms in the darkness. He had watched their wings lower and lock above the wet tile roofs. Then they were gone in a hissing acceleration. Against his better judgment he had returned, joining other

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residents in a slow scavenging across the rubble of the destroyed building. They moved in a methodical stooped walk. Picking at brick. Turning shattered monitor screens. Fumbling at the pockets of the bodies left behind. He had found no trace of Three-Fingers and doubted he was alive. He Dan he found, but only in pieces.

He turned the datacube again in his hands.

"Where did you get that?"

He jerked skittishly and moved to run, but a hand was holding him and he was immobile. It was a Chinese woman and she wore white gloves. He stared at the hand which held him.

"Do you have something for me?" she asked. Her Mandarin was clear and educated, perfect, as though she came from Beijing itself.

"I don't know."

"Is that yours?"

"No."

"Were you supposed to give it to me?"

"I don't know."

"I missed you at the bridge."

"Why didn't you come?"

"There were delays," she said and her eyes became hooded and dark.

Wang Jun reached out to hand her the datacube. "You have to be careful with it. It has the Dalai Lama."

"I know. I was coming to you. I was afraid I had lost you. Come." She motioned him. "You are cold. There is a bed and food waiting for you." She motioned again and he followed her out of the doorway and into the rain.

She led him through the wet streets. In his mind, the images of VTOLs and exploding monitors and Three-Fingers's blossoming red mortality made him wary as they crossed intersections and bore along the old streets of Chengdu.

The woman held his hand firm in hers, and she bore him with direction and purpose so that no matter how many twists and turns they took, they were always closer to the organic skeleton of the city core. It rose above them, glowing. Dwarfing them and the constructors who swung from it on gossamer lines. They swarmed it as ants might, slowly growing their nest.

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Then they were under its bones, walking through the wet organic passageways of the growing creature. Wang Jun smelled compost and death. The air grew warm and humid as they headed deeper into the architectural animal. Glowing chips embedded in the woman's wrists passed them through construction checkpoints until they came to a lift, a cage that rose up through Huojianzhu's internals, sliding on smooth organic rails. Through the bars of the cage Wang Jun saw levels completed, shining and habitable, the walls with the appearance of polished steel, and fluorescent lamps, glowing, in their brackets. He saw levels where only the segmented superstructure of the beast existed. A monster with its bones exposed; wet slick things sheened with a biological ooze. Hardening silicon mucus coated the bones, flowed, and built up successive layers to form walls. Huojianzhu grew and where it grew the Biotects and constructors oversaw, guiding and ensuring that its growth followed their carefully imagined intentions. The beautiful woman, and Wang Jun with her, rose higher.

They came to a level nearly complete. Her feet echoed in a hallway, and she came to a door. Her hand leaned gently on the surface of the door and its skin moved slightly under her pressure so that Wang Jun was unsure if the door molded to her hand or reached out to caress it. The door swung open and Wang Jun saw the luxury of the heights of which he had always dreamed.

In a room with a bed so soft his back ached and with pillows so fluffy he believed he smothered, he woke. There were voices. " — a beggar. No one," she said.

"Then blank him and turn him out."

"He helped us."

"Leave his pocket with money, then."

Their voices became distant, and though he wished he could stay awake, he slept again.

Wang Jun sank into the enveloping cushions of a chair so deep that his feet could not touch the polished elegance of the real wooden floors. He was well rested now, having climbed finally out of the womb of bedding and pillows which had tangled him. Around him, *shanshui* paintings hung

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from smooth white walls, and recessed shelves held intricately fired vases from China's dynasties, long dead and gone. The kitchen he had already made acquaintance with, watching the lady who looked Chinese but wasn't as she prepared a mountain of food for him on burners that flared like suns, and made tea with water that scalded as it came from the faucet. In other rooms, lights glowed on and off as he entered and departed, and there was carpet, soft expanses of pale fiber that were always warm under his feet. Now he sat in the enveloping chair and watched with dark eyes as the lady and her foreign companion paced before him. Behind them, the Dalai Lama's cube sat on a shelf, blue and small.

"*Sile?*"

Wang Jun started at the sound of her voice, and he felt his heart beating. Outside the windows of the apartment thick Chengdu mist hung, stagnant and damp. No more rain. He struggled out of the chair and went to look out the windows. He could not see the lights of Chengdu's old city below. The mist was too thick. The woman watched him as her counterpart spoke. "Yeah, either the Chinese or the Europeans blew his head full of holes. They're just annoyed because they lost him."

"What should we do?"

"I'm waiting for an indication from the embassy. The Tibetans want us to destroy him. Keep whining about how his soul won't be reborn, if we don't destroy it."

She laughed. "Why not write him onto a new body?"

"Don't be sacrilegious."

"That's how they see it? Fanatics can be so — "

" — intractable," he finished for her.

"So this whole mission is a waste?"

"He's not much good to us without his body. The Tibetans won't recognize him if we write him onto a new body and he's no good as leverage against the Chinese if he doesn't have a following."

She sighed. "I wish we didn't have to work with them."

"Without the Tibetans, we wouldn't even have known to look for the kid."

"Well, now they're threatening that if we don't give him back, the Pali Lama is going to flay our skins, or something."

"Palden Lhamo," said the man.

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"What?"

He repeated, "Palden Lhamo. She's a Tibetan goddess. Supposed to be the protector of Tibet and our digital friend." He jerked his head at the datacube sitting on its shelf. "The paintings of her show her riding a mule across seas of blood and using the flayed skin of her son as a saddle blanket."

"What a lovely culture they've got."

"You should see the paintings: Red hair, necklaces of skulls — "

"Enough."

Wang Jun said, "Can I open the window?"

The woman looked over at the man; he shrugged.

"*Suibian*," she said.

Wang Jun undid the securing clasps and rolled the wide window open. Chill air washed into the room. He peered down into the orange glow of the mist, leaning far out into the air. He stroked the spongy organic exoskeleton of the building, a resilient honeycomb of holes. Below, he could just make out the shifting silhouettes of constructors clambering across the surface of the structure. Behind him the conversation continued.

"So what do we do?"

He waved at the datacube. "We could always plug his eminence into a computer and ask him for advice."

Wang Jun's ears perked up. He wanted to hear the man inside the computer again.

"Would the Chinese be interested in a deal, even if his body is gone?"

"Maybe. They'd probably keep his cube in a desk drawer. Let it gather dust. If he never reincarnated, it would be fine with them. One less headache for them to deal with."

"Maybe we'll be able to trade him for something still, then."

"Not much, though. So what if he does reincarnate? It'll be twenty years before he has an effect on them." He sighed. "Trade talks start tomorrow. This operation's starting to look like a scrub at the home office. They're already rumbling about extracting us before the talks begin. At least the EU didn't get him."

"Well, I'll be glad to get back to California."

"Yeah."

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Wang Jun turned from his view and asked, "Will you kill him?"

The pair exchanged looks. The man turned away, muttering under his breath. Wang Jun held in his response to the man's rudeness. Instead he said, "I'm hungry."

"He's hungry, *again*," muttered the man.

"We only have instants, now," said the woman.

"*Xing*," said Wang Jun. The woman went into the kitchen and Wang Jun's eyes fastened on the dark blue sheen of the datacube, sitting on its shelf.

"I'm cold," said the man. "Close the window."

Wang Jun sniffed at the aroma of frying food coming from the woman and the kitchen. His belly rumbled, but he went to the window. "Okay."

The mist clung to him as he clung to the superstructure of the biologic city. His fingers dug into its spongy honeycomb skin and he heard the rush of Chengdu far below, but could not see it through the mist. He heard curses and looked up. Light silhouetted the beautiful woman who looked Chinese but wasn't and the man as they peered out of their luxury apartment window from high above.

He dug a fist deeper into the honeycomb wall and waved at them them with his free hand, and then climbed lower with the self-confident ease of a beggar monkey. He looked up again to see the man make to climb out the window, and then the woman pulled him back in.

He descended. Slipping deeper into the mist, clambering for the slick safety of the pavement far below. He passed constructors and Biotects, working late-night shifts. They all hung precariously from the side of the mountainous building, but only he was so daring as to climb the skin of the creature without the protection of a harness. They watched him climb by with grave eyes, but they made no move to stop him. Who were they to care if his fingers slipped and he fell to the infinitely distant pavement? He passed them and continued his descent.

When he looked up again, seeking the isolated window from which he had issued, it was gone. Lost in the thickness of the chill mist. He guessed the man and woman would not follow. That they would have more pressing concerns than to find a lone beggar boy with a useless datacube somewhere in the drizzling streets of Chengdu. He smiled to himself.

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They would pack and go home to their foreign country and leave him to remain in Chengdu. Beggars always remained.

His arms began to shake with strain as his descent continued. The climb was already taking him longer than he had guessed possible. The sheer size of the core was greater than he had ever imagined. His fingers dug into the spongy biomass of Huojianzhu's skin, seeking another hold. The joints of his fingers ached and his arms trembled. It was cold this high even though the night air was still. The wet mist and the damp spongy walls he clung to chilled his fingers, numbing them and making him unsure of his handholds. He watched where he placed each hand in an agony of care, seeking stability and safety with every grip.

For the first time he wondered how long it would be until he fell. The descent was too long, and the clinging chill was sinking deeper into his bones. The mists parted and he could see the lights of Chengdu proper, spread out below him. His hopes sank as he saw finally how high he hung above the city.

He dug for another hand-hold and when he set his weight against it, the spongy mass gave way and he was suddenly dangling by a single weak hand while the Chengdu lights spun crazily below him. He scrabbled desperately for another hand-hold. He dug his feet deep into the spongy surface and found one. He saw where his slipping hand had torn away the wall. There was a deep rent, and from it, the milky blood of the biostructure dripped slowly. His heart beat faster staring at Huojianzhu's mucus wound and he imagined himself slipping and falling; spattering across the pavement while his blood ran slick and easy into the street gutters. He fought to control his rising panic as his arms trembled and threatened to give way. Then he forced himself to move his limbs and descend, to seek some respite from the climb, a hope of survival on the harsh skin of the core.

He spoke to himself. Told himself that he would survive. That he would not fall and die on the pavement of the street. Not he. Not *Xiao* Wang. No. Not *Xiao* Wang at all. Not Little Wang anymore. Wang Jun; Soldier Wang. Twisted and bent though he was, Soldier Wang would survive. He smiled to himself. Wang Jun would survive. He continued his descent with shaking arms and numbed fingers, picking each hold carefully, and eventually when he began to believe that he could climb no

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more, he found a hole in Huojianzhu's skin and swung himself into the safety of the ducts of the animal structure.

Standing on a firm surface he turned and looked out at Chengdu's spread lights. In a few more years all of Chengdu would be overwhelmed by the spreading core. He wondered where a beggar boy would run then. What streets would be left open for those such as he? He reached into his pocket and felt the hard edges of the datacube. He drew it from his pocket, and gazed on its smooth blue perfect surface. Its perfect geometric edges. So much consternation over the man who lived inside. He hefted the cube. It was light. Too light to hold the whole of a person. He remembered his brief interaction with the Dalai Lama, in a dark room under the glow of monitors. He squeezed the cube tight in his hand and then went to the edge of the duct. Chengdu lay below him.

He cocked his arm to throw. Winding it back to launch the Dalai Lama in his silicon cell out into the empty air. To arc and fall, faster and faster until he shattered against the distant ground and was released, to begin again his cycle of rebirth. He held his arm cocked, then whipped it forward in a trajectory of launch. When his arm had completed its swing, the datacube and the Dalai Lama still sat safe in his palm. Smooth and blue and undamaged.

He considered it. Stroking it, feeling its contours in his hand. Then he slid it back into his pocket and swung himself out, once again onto the skin of Huojianzhu. He smiled as he climbed, digging his fingers into the living flesh of the building. He wondered how long this infinity of climbing would last, and if he would reach the streets whole or as a bloody pulp. Chengdu seemed a long way below.

The datacube rested in his pocket. If he fell, it would shatter and the Dalai Lama would be released. If he survived? For now he would keep it. Later, perhaps, he would destroy it. The Dalai Lama was asleep in the cube, and would not overly mind the longer wait. And, Wang Jun thought, who in all the world of important people could say, as he could say, that he had the Dalai Lama in his pocket?

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

King Rat, by China Miéville, Macmillan, 1998, £9.99

ANYONE familiar with the tropes of fantasy and fairy tales already knows the story: the young man who, all unbeknownst to him, is of royal lineage, something he only finds out when either mysterious people suddenly show up, trying to kill him, or he leaves his known life (of his own will or not) to go adventuring, often both. There's usually an elder figure involved from whom he learns of his lineage, responsibilities, special powers (if he has such), and the like.

In a general sense, that's the basic plot of *King Rat*. Saul Garamond returns to London from a vacation to find his father dead. He's arrested for the murder and rescued from jail by a mysterious figure, and then the fun begins.

You see, the royal blood Saul carries is rat blood. Unlike umpteen other fantasies, *King Rat* takes us out of the high courts of fairy tale, away from the romanticized city streets of many current fantasies, down into the sewers with the rats. And not cute, cuddly Muppet rats, either. No, these rats stink, eat garbage, urinate to mark their territory — in short, do all the things rats do. And so do humans with rat blood such as Saul realizes he is.

Miéville's perspective is, if you'll excuse the apparent paradox of this comment, such a refreshing change from the usual take on fantasy and otherworldly beings.

Of course, that's not all *King Rat* has going for it. Miéville explores the parts of London most of us won't see. He writes knowledgeably about the rooftops and crowded market streets, sewers and housing estates, the alternative club scene, jungle music, bass and drum. And his characters are fabulous, even the bit players such as Saul's friends from his previous life and those he meets in his new: Anansi the King

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of Spiders, Loplow the King of Birds, and the like. But he really shines with Saul, especially depicting the slow metamorphosis from a normal human disgusted by the idea of living in a sewer and eating garbage to one relishing it.

This is a riveting, brilliant novel. The language sings, the concepts are original and engrossing, and the villainy...

<Spoiler alert.>

Allow me, for once, to break tradition with this column and give away a few elements that spoil surprises, but show just how fresh Miéville's take on fantasy is. His antagonist is a flute-player named Peter, unassuming in appearance, mad as a hatter in temperament. He also happens to be the original Pied Piper. I loved the King of the Rats' retelling of the classic story — how it would appear from a rat's point of view — and how Miéville updates it all into the present. The Piper can control any species with his flute, but only one at a time. He hates Saul because Saul has both human and rat blood and so he can't touch Saul with his music. Now imagine how delighted he is to discover the wonders of modern recording technology, the ability to overdub and sample.

It's wonderful touches such as this, the inspired mingling of old mythic matter with the contemporary world, that make *King Rat* such an utter delight.

If your local bookseller can't get you a copy from the UK, Tor Books will be publishing a North American edition in October 1999, just in time for Halloween.

Changer, by Jane Lindskold, Avon Eos, 1998, $5.99

There are two plot devices that always grab my interest. One is when the protagonist is suffering amnesia and any number of people want his life because of what he "knows," never mind that if they'd just left well enough alone, there wouldn't necessarily be a problem that required such an extreme solution in the first place. (Mind you, then there wouldn't be a book either, would there?)

The other is when an author purports to explain all of the mythologies and mysteries of the world (within the context of her novel, of course), threading them together like so many disparate beads, each a part of the overall pattern. The more thorough and connective she can make these threads of explanation, the more fun it is. I suppose it appeals to the conspiracy buff that

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most of us have tucked away somewhere inside ourselves, that Nosy Parker who likes to ferret out the secrets behind everything and then connect the dots.

Jane Lindskold's latest novel falls into the latter camp of plot devices, and is a wonderful example of how to do this sort of story right. From the very start of the book, I got the same buzz as when I first read Jack Williamson's *Darker Than You Think*, or Zelazny's *Nine Princes in Amber*, that delicious sense of embarking on a grand adventure, a grand *fantastical* adventure, but grounded in our own world, utilizing our many and varied mythologies, rather than making up new ones that don't necessarily carry the same resonance.

In *Changer* we share our world with a race of immortal beings who we've mythologized into legend: the story-cycles of King Arthur and Anansi the Spider Trickster (him again — must be a trend), Norse sagas, Greek Myths, North American Coyote and Raven tales, and the like. Some of these beings have abilities beyond our own, such as the shape-changing title character, some have a non-human appearance, some merely live forever. They live side-by-side with us, hidden from our view — especially the non-human ones. And therein lies the problem that sets the plot in motion.

The story begins when the title character, living in coyote form, returns to his den to find his family slain. Because he doesn't have the resources to track down who hired the killers, he turns to the self-styled king of these immortals, a man named Arthur, once known as Gilgamesh, who attends to the needs of his subjects from his most recent home in New Mexico. At the same time as Arthur and the Changer worry at this problem, someone else is stirring up the non-human immortals, asking why they shouldn't be allowed to walk among humans, and who is Arthur to stop them from doing so?

Frankly, the plot then gets so complicated it would take far more than this column to do a summary any justice. Let me just say that however tangled it does get, turning in on itself, this way and that, Lindskold never loses control. From start to finish it is, and remains, a smart, funny, well-detailed romp of an adventure story that still finds room to address serious concerns — a fabulous Romance in the best, and old, sense of the word.

I liked so much about this book, from figuring out which legendary

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figure was which before the story told me, to Lindskold's ability to tell a fast-paced, contemporary story that still carries the weight and style of old mythological story cycles, that *Changer* will definitely remain part of my library and be reread more than once.

Bag of Bones, by Stephen King, Scribner, 1998, $28.

It seems to me that Stephen King is actually two writers, and, no, I don't mean King and Richard Bachman. It's more how King's work appears to fall into two camps: the more character-driven stories such as *The Green Mile*, "Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption," and *Dolores Claiborne*, and the "idea" stories, usually kind of goofy, a combination of shock and schlock, such as the recent simultaneous releases *Desperation* and *The Regulators*.

The two styles often bleed into each other. The schlocky material gets a boost, because even with the most preposterous plot, King

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retains that gift he has for characterization and story-driven prose. The character stories don't fare as well, as when fine novels such as *It* and *Insomnia* get derailed by giant turtles or silly aliens.

The trouble is, one never knows which writer is coming up to bat with each new book. Although, please don't get me wrong. It's not the horrific aspect of some of the books that weaken them (*'Salem's Lot, The Shining,* and their like will remain forever classics), but the plain silliness of some of them. And to be fair, a writer has to take chances. Vampires in Maine probably sounded pretty off the wall back in 1975. So I suppose it's a fifty-fifty chance whether it works or not. The one thing King has never been afraid of is taking a chance, more power to him.

All of which brings us to King's latest, *Bag of Bones.* This is definitely a character-driven story involving Michael Noonan, a widowed writer who, suffering writer's block, returns to his summer place in an area of rural Maine known as "the TR." With well-sustained and effective supernatural elements, King takes us through Noonan's discovery of something that haunts not only this rural area to which he's recently returned, but also haunted the last few months of his wife's life and might have brought on the aneurysm that killed her.

King invokes the writer's life well enough, but really shines here in his depictions of rural Maine, the close-knit community where Noonan has his summer home, and that most fascinating device of writers, exploring how the past can wreak the havoc it does upon the present. Secrets never stay hidden — not forever — as the inhabitants of the TR find to their regret.

Although not a happy book, King's new one is a powerful, moving novel. I'd say *Bag of Bones* is vintage King, but that's only in terms of the storytelling spell he weaves. He hasn't forsaken the spookiness and scares that have made him a brand name, but he uses them more judiciously now; rather than overwhelming the story as they sometimes have in the past, they are firmly a part of it instead. The present-day King has far more insight into the human condition than did his younger self, and better yet, all the skills required to share it with us.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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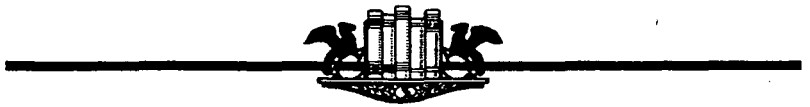

BOOKS

DOUGLAS E. WINTER

"But of that date or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven."

—*The Gospel According to Mark* 13:32.

Time is running out...

WHEN I read those portentous words, which introduce the jacket copy for my anthology *Revelations*, there came the inevitable moment of doubt, the cynic inside me rising to object: Of course it is. That's what time does. It just keeps on ticking; and, as that book sought to show, we somehow — often despite ourselves — survive.

But as the clock winds on toward triple zeroes — the Year 2000 — our cultural appetite for destruction seems ravenous. Disaster is in again, and the bigger the bang, the better — for both prophets and profits.

In the slender yet substantial *Questioning the Millennium* (Harmony, hc, $17.95), Stephen Jay Gould contemplates the curious history of things millennial with gentle but no-nonsense pragmatism. His subtitle — "A Rationalist's Guide to a Precisely Arbitrary Countdown" — says it all, and his ruminations are a much-needed cold shower for the fever of millennial doomsayers.

Gould's essays respond to three enduring questions: What is a millennium, and how was the Biblical millennium — the post-Tribulation reign of Christ on Earth forecast in the *Apocalypse of St. John the Divine* — interpreted as a measure of the "end" of human history? When does the present millennium end, and the next one begin (since it doesn't happen on January 1, 2000)? And why do calendars and other measures of time matter? In the closing, and most compelling, reverie, Gould considers the arbitrariness of a thousand-year cycle, the practical impossibilities of calendars, and the

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miraculous chronological calculations of an autistic savant — his son.

While *Questioning the Millennium* is a handy guide to resolving calendrical arguments — and to maintaining a sense of humor and perspective as the nines roll into zeroes—Richard Abanes's *End Times Visions: The Road to Armageddon?* (Four Walls Eight Windows, hc, $25.95) is a hand-wringing exposé of the mortal and spiritual peril of end-times thinking. Abanes, an avowed "former cult member" and "familiar voice on Christian radio," writes with righteous conviction about the apocalyptic obsessiveness of psychics, seers, militias, madmen, and religious hucksters — from the unfortunate William Miller (whose Millerite movement was founded, and then foundered, upon repeated miscalculations of the date of the world's end) to this generation's most renowned and financially rewarded fearmonger, Hal Lindsey.

Although at times sensationalistic, *End Times Visions* debunks the fuzzy logic of Biblical and secular prophecy, and proves a rather sad commentary on the corruption of Christian thinking by those with ulterior political and financial motives. Yet its essential question — why the prospect of a coming end-time should dictate the lives (and, indeed, deaths) of so many people today — remains unanswered save in a final summation that considers the curious links between fear and faith.

As is often the case, a better answer is found in the fiction of our time — or, as some would have it, the fiction of our end-time.

Religious themes have powered many of the significant apocalyptic novels of this generation, from Stephen King's *The Stand* to Elizabeth Hand's *Glimmering*, but it may come as a surprise that the end of the world is now the pre-eminent subject of Christian fiction. In years past, the prospect of Armageddon was usually limited to Christian prophecy texts such as the Criswellish *I Predict* (1970) and *What in the World Will Happen Next?* (1974) by Salem Kirban and, of course, Hal Lindsey's megaselling *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), which, despite scheduling the Rapture for 1981, remains the most popular religious text of our time. Until this decade, only Kirban (in his clunky 666) and a few other evangelicals ventured outside the realm of "non-fiction" and into quasi-science-fictional entertainments based upon scriptural visions of The End.

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The inevitable transition of the prophecy genre into fiction was signaled by Pat Robertson's disastrous disaster novel *The End of the Age* (1995) and Lindsey's *Blood Moon* (1996), but it has been perfected by the astonishingly popular "Left Behind" series by Tim La Haye and Jerry B. Jenkins, which premiered in 1995 with *Left Behind* (Tyndale House, tpb, $12.97). La Haye is a veteran evangelical doomsayer whose *The Beginning of the End* (1972) was revised in its 1991 edition to delete the suggestion that the 1990s were the End Times (he now seems to favor the years 2028 to 2038). With three other installments to date — *Tribulation Force, Nicolae: The Rise of the Anti-Christ*, and this year's *Soul Harvest* (all Tyndale House, hc and tpb, prices vary) — the "Left Behind" series reportedly has two million copies in print, and has crossed over from the Christian and family bookstore circuit into the secular mass market.

This is by no means a literary accomplishment: *Left Behind* is stodgily written horror and science fantasy that veers into the dogmatism of a preachment — which, of course, it is. The series is based on the tenets of premillennial dispensationalism, a theoretical — and highly subjective — construct of Biblical prophecies (and, on occasion, scriptures lifted out of context) that was explored in Michael Tolkin's disturbing motion picture *The Rapture*. Dispensational wisdom holds that the End Times will be signaled by a "Rapture" in which true Christians will be transported to Heaven, leaving friends and family behind for a seven-year time of Tribulation in which the Antichrist rules the Earth, denying food and shelter to all those who do not accept the Mark of the Beast. Christ and his host will then return to Earth to confront and defeat the Antichrist, bringing on a golden age of peace — the Millennium. (A competing theory — historic premillennialism — holds that there is no Rapture and that Christians will not escape the Tribulation, thus spawning most Christian survivalist movements.)

The hero of *Left Behind* is everymanish Captain Rayford Steele, who pilots a 747-load of passengers over the Atlantic while contemplating an attractive flight attendant who lacks his wife's annoying religious mania: "God was OK with Rayford Steele. Rayford even enjoyed church occasionally. But since Irene had hooked up with a smaller congregation and was into

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weekly Bible studies and church every Sunday, Rayford had become uncomfortable. Hers was not a church where people gave you the benefit of the doubt, assumed the best about you, and let you be. People there had actually asked him, to his face, what God was doing in his life."

Before you can say — Repent! — it's Rapture time. And since, for Rayford Steele, God was merely "OK," he finds himself...left behind. Joined by ace investigative reporter Cameron "Buck" Williams, Steele learns the error of his ways — and the truth (usually literal) of all things Biblical — while witnessing the rise of the One World Government and the Antichrist.

The novel reads like a curious time machine, with the genuine feel of having been written in the fifties (indeed, the female lead is named...Hattie?). Central to its emotional core is an intense nostalgia for what we have lost, not through the imposition of God's judgment but through the complex and increasingly amoral existence that preceded our fall. La Haye and Jenkins recognize, if only instinctively, that their story is powered by the desire for some imaginary past that is simpler and, of course, lacking in moral ambiguity. But they also recognize the redemptive power of an otherwise bleak take on the New Testament: Those left behind have a kind of reprieve, a last chance, to make things right, with themselves and with their God.

It is here that *Left Behind* seems, at first glance, curious; for its heroes are not the hardshell believers who were lifted to Heaven in the Rapture, but instead the passive, the weak-kneed, and, indeed, the sinful. If Rayford Steele, a genuinely good man, is denied Heaven because of his straying eye and occasional tip of the bottle, then surely we, the readers, are damned; but La Haye and Jenkins do not imagine our fate with smug self-righteousness — instead, their characters are cannily constructed to cause the readers to identify with them in their search for meaning and, in time, faith. Although this is not great fiction, it is effective evangelism — but directed, for the most part, to the choir.

The "Left Behind" series is now a marketing machine, with audiocassette versions and a separate, four-book young adult series called *Left Behind: The Kids.* (Tyndale publicity includes the curious report that: "While dealing with topics that, on an adult level, may

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seem frightening and incomprehensible, Jenkins and La Haye's new juvenile series offers an entertaining, challenging, and compelling message for young people.") And, yes, a motion picture is in the works.

A competing multimedia extravaganza is offered by the ministry of legendary "walking Bible" and apocalypse maven Jack Van Impe: *Apocalypse: Caught in the Eye of the Storm* is a novel by Peter and Paul Lalonde (Prophecy Partners, hc, $19.99) as well as a direct-to-video motion picture with a compact disc soundtrack. The Lalondes are best known for their television program *This Week In Bible Prophecy*, and their prophecy texts include *The Mark of the Beast* (1994).

Apocalypse portrays another dispensationalist vision of the end, but with a slicker, more contemporary touch. Television reporters Bronson Pearl and Helen Hannah are covering the world's final war when the Rapture whisks believers heavenward. Soon the Antichrist appears (in the form of the European Union president), and the reporters — who are lovers — must face the time of Tribulation and, of course, save their very souls.

Clearly central to these dystopic fictions are tropes and themes common to countless sf novels: the cautionary imperative; almost pleasurable depictions of mass destruction; post-apocalyptic survival; the outlaw caste with access to forbidden knowledge; pursuit and enslavement by a totalitarian regime; and, of course, redemption through evolution (in this case, spiritual). Although often unwittingly cruel, these novels do echo with hope despite their reliance on fear as their most persuasive force.

There is no hope, nor love, to be found in the allegedly Christian sf novel *Solar Flare* by Larry Burkett (Northfield, hc, $18.99), which instead offers a pathetic political manifesto. In the novel's first half, Burkett, the founder of something called "Christian Financial Concepts," eschews the Biblical and cranks out the tedious tale of Professor James Hobart, a tarnished academic who predicts a world-changing solar flare — which, after much derision, actually occurs, sending the planet into pre-industrial revolution chaos. But the solar flare is not our enemy, oh no: it's the Democratic politicians and the liberal news media and, of course, the poor, huddled masses who live in the inner cities. Xenophobia is rampant in these pages, with the good guys wearing Anglo-Saxon names and voting Republican, and

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the baddies being hyphenated Americans and others who believe in such negligible notions as civil rights.

Order is restored, with Burkett making his intentions clear: "There was no ACLU present, no federal courts to interfere, and no politicians vying for votes — only the police and the soldiers, and when they saw someone in the streets carrying a weapon, they shot first and asked questions later, if possible." Apparently Burkett misplaced his copy of the Ten Commandments, along with the rest of his Christianity, somewhere in those mutual funds and other "financial concepts." Shame on Moody Bible Institute, whose subsidiary published this piece of hate.

Kenny Love's *Millennium Eve* (Mys-Tech Books, P. O. Box 291, Crockett TX 75835, hc, $24.95) is a far more pleasant, although downright loopy, fable with Biblical underpinnings. In the final days of 1999, the first female president confronts an android conspiracy to annihilate humanity on January 1, 2000. The androids, it seems, have been visited by the angel Gabriel, who has taught them the Bible — which scientists had excluded from their database. Betrayed by the knowledge that man is not the true Creator, the androids decide that they are the means for enacting the final judgment of *Revelation*.

Although the least conventional of these novels (Love even uses "foul" language), *Millennium Eve* curls into the expected political posture: "Liberalism had finally seemed to achieve its dreaded results.... Beginning with the passive 'free love' movement of the '60's right through to the physician-assisted suicides and pro-abortion movements of the '90's. Life had reached its rooftop with nowhere else to go...." Destruction seems the appropriate payoff for our sinful society, but, unlike his peers, Love lifts his finger from the trigger, declining to wreak havoc on civilization and forestalling the arrival of the End Times. Despite his penchant for constant italicization, unknown words ("contrastly"), and gosh-wow sf slang, there is something to Love's story that is sadly lacking from the likes of *Solar Flare*, and even the "Left Behind" books: the notion of metaphor.

It is ironic and yet inevitable that one of the better religious novels in recent years should take the form of a satire. But David Prill's *Second Coming Attractions* (St. Martin's Press, hc, $22.95) takes the high road; it eschews the easy,

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and increasingly lame, born-again bashing of TV comedy in favor of a sly inquisition of the marketing of Christianity set in the Holy Hollywood of inspirational filmmaking. Leviticus Speck, son of religious film legend Noah Foster Speck and heir apparent to Good Samaritan Studios, gazes into the abyss of the nineties and finds that most troublesome of demons gazing back at him: ambiguity. Leviticus realizes that the whitebread wholesomeness of his father's films no longer plays in Peoria, but he cannot stomach the grotesque and graphic anti-abortion propaganda that a competitor — the aptly named Blood of the Lamb Films — proffers in the Lord's name.

Enter young Nicholas Puckett, a wannabe screenwriter who has penned *The Fetal Detective*, a pro-life noir told from the perspective of an unborn, but hardboiled, avenger. The film offers financial salvation for Good Samaritan; but Leviticus, whose faith is real — and thus troubled — wonders: Is it spiritual salvation?

Although primed with wicked humor, *Second Coming Attractions* is defiantly honest to its characters — and to Christianity. Prill's punches, when they come, are legitimate ones, not cheap shots; and his novel manages to entertain while offering a challenging discourse on the twining of religion and the anti-abortion movement. There is no mass destruction here, only subtle and sometimes painful skewers into the ways we think about, and experience, religion today.

Douglas E. Winter
Oakton, Virginia
August 1998

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Kit Reed's recent books include her collection Weird Women, Wired Women, *and her latest "Kit Craig" thriller* Some Safe Place. *A new collection entitled* Seven for the Apocalypse *is in the works. She says this story arose from a brief flirtation she had with Hollywood, when agents were returning her calls from moving cars and people bought her drinks at the Peninsula Hotel on Little Santa Monica, in the shadow of CAA. All that power, she thought—what if someone unleashed it on a different sort of cause?*

Unlimited

By Kit Reed

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See the malachite reception desk and the glistening parquet of our outer lobby, the silk Persian rugs with a corner flipped back so you can count the thousand-knots-per-inch until one of our assistants bothers to come and take your history. Get a load of our carpeted walls and the tinted one-way glass that juts over Wilshire Boulevard and Little Santa Monica. The glass for obvious reasons, the carpeting to muffle the screaming, something we never discuss at these preliminary meetings. We are at the apex here! Note the Brancusi fountain and the malachite steps you mount to remind our receptionist that you are still waiting.

Once you have cleared the outer lobby, observe the lush kidskin sofa in the Gauguin room where you sit and stew, waiting for me to clear ten minutes for this interview.

Success? You bet. Our assistants alone! Quick and clever in their chic black dresses, the best they can manage on what we pay them. Phi Betes from the Ivies, these girls killed and died to get here and they're every one of them a size six, okay? And if the pay scale seems mean to you and fourteen-hour days excessive, remember that every one of them aims through craft and diligence to become one of us.

The upper echelon. Note that we are all women here. It's a policy decision. Tact and efficiency. Finesse.

Further signs: my office! Instead of a desk, we face each other over my bronze coffee table. Chinese, dug out of some tomb in the year one-thousand, don't ask. Then there's the art: Naum Gabo, a treasure in plexi and monofilament. A tiny Rothko. A Bacon, and if the torn jaws gape as if the victim is being flayed alive and screaming as we sit here — well, we'll get to that. A Pollock. A Degas. Double-rubbed black lacquer on the walls and silver floors; see our logo inlaid in gold, which is why you are wearing complimentary terrycloth booties over your Guccis.

Yes I know you are a major player. If you were anything less, you couldn't afford me.

Now regard me. Velvet Martinet, the captain of our industry.

It's okay to look. You have, after all, been cleared by Security. After Accounting. We've accepted your nonrefundable deposit, Krugerrands as per the preliminary agreement. Naturally we had the items in question authenticated and the dollar amount pegged to the market value at the close of that day's trading. And your net worth and growth potential

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evaluated before our receptionist could even think about making an appointment for you. The balance? We know you're good for it.

Otherwise you would not be sitting here.

Meet my eyes! This is when I look deep into you and see whether I trust you. I am the last barrier. All that stands between you and the service you so badly want from us.

If I clamp your hands to the table hard enough to scare you, tough. When I take hold, there's no man strong enough to free himself. Don't look away! Not if you want this. I said, meet my eyes!

Do not be frightened by what you see. It's what you're paying for. Hold still! Quit hyperventilating. It'll be over in a minute.

This is essential. The moment in which I make sure. Sure you won't panic, sure you are good for it. Sure you won't back down or attack me, sure you're not from some agency bent on breaking me.

More. Rapport. We must establish rapport before we can even begin to talk about your problem.

Now.

You can speak. Be assured that if we proceed your down payment and today's billable hours will be credited to your balance, which as you know comes due immediately upon signing.

Time to lay your problem on the table. Don't worry. The room's been swept and secured. Our people have been over it twice since I met with the last client. It's safe for you to say it out loud.

It's even okay for you to call me Velvet.

Oh yes, and for client protection, our cameras are recording this transaction.

Um, Ah. The client sits with his head between his knees. This is so hard! The humiliation. The desire. *Uh. Ah! Before we start, could I ask you a couple of questions*?

Meanwhile, elsewhere: In deepest Brentwood just north of Sunset, producer/developer Whitney Ryder is waked by a phone bleating. He swims in his empty bed, groping for the damn thing. Got to stop that noise! It is late afternoon. Daphne's been gone since Sunday — no biggie — and he's snorted and popped a few things in the interim, not because he's

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bummed, exactly, just to ride the wave until he hears from Bobby that the big deal is completed.

It is not exactly nice to be awake right now. The larger circumstances of Ryder's life have begun sliding into place like massive stones on rollers moving in to seal some pharaoh's tomb.

Pawing through yellow satin sheets, he hits a lump. "*Gotcha!*" He snaps like a seal catching a fish and pops *talk* with his thumb, shouting, "Ryder!"

"It's me," Bobby says. "You don't have to yell."

It's Bobby. "I was asleep!"

"While Rome is fucking burning," Bobby says. Bobby finished U.C.L.A. before he moved up from the mail room to become Ryder's assistant. He's right in there with the classical allusions. It's one of the reasons Ryder keeps him around. "We've lost the deal."

"Fill me in."

"Drove my Chevy to the levee but the levee was dry." Never one to say a thing just once, Bobby says, "I called our money but our money isn't returning our calls."

"They — *what*?"

"I'm telling you, somebody got to them."

"Our money?" Betrayed, Ryder howls, "Somebody got to *our money*?"

"Somebody got to our money." Bobby rides on. "They backed off and Maxamar waltzed in and scooped up the property."

"Maxamar! Bastard, bastard!" Ryder growls. "Getchell!"

"You don't know it was Getchell," Bobby says.

"My best friend! It's gotta be." Yes there is a rat loose in the infrastructure. Gnawing at his vitals. Ryder snaps, "Who the hell else could it be?"

"He wished you success," Bobby says like a good assistant.

"Yeah, right," Ryder says bitterly. "Right before he walked." He's pissed at Getchell; best buds since fourth grade in Ocala, coming up together under the Florida sun, two little kids with big ambitions. Move west, make it big in L.A. Together. Three days before the key meeting, his sandbox pally Duane Getchell takes his marbles and walks. "Eight bucks gets you 160 K it was Getchell."

"He sent flowers."

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"Flowers," Ryder snorts. "Horseshoe or funeral wreath?" Dead is just as dead. He feels creditors gnawing away to that old gradeschool refrain, "Oh heck, oh heck, it's up to my neck..."

Bobby strikes a note halfway between hard and gentle. "Look at it this way, he's not the only one out there..." who hates you.

"Whoever it is..." Ryder is wired by this time, wide-jawed and furious, wacked out on adrenaline and crosshatching the bedroom like a retriever bagging flies. "The bastard is going to pay."

"Who?"

Ryder says through clenched teeth, "Whoever's behind Maxamar."

"Don't be so sure."

"And pay bigtime — what did you say?"

Bobby mumbles something Ryder can't quite grasp.

"*What did you say*?"

"...sure it's a bastard," Bobby mutters, frff, "um...Daphne."

"Daphne would never do a thing like that to me. I think she still loves me." Ryder shakes the flip-phone angrily. "I told you, *quit mumbling*."

Bobby mumbles, marginally louder. "Egil Hoover."

"My *broker*?"

"Well," Bobby mumbles, "Daphne is still married to him."

"Oh, Egil. Egil's a bastard, but he isn't vindictive."

"That's what you think," Bobby says.

"Then think harder!"

Bobby is trying to find a way to break bad news. Out of his fuzzy silence comes the worst. "Could be our money screwing us."

"Just because our money isn't returning our calls, that doesn't mean we're being screwed by our money."

Bobby mumbles a little louder.

Some days Ryder hates Bobby. He growls, "I said, *what*? *What did you say*?"

Oh, desperate man, Bobby just keeps mumbling, but loud enough so Ryder either will or won't be able to catch what he is pitching.

"Fuck that shit," Ryder shouts, even though he's not exactly sure what Bobby's telling him. By this time Ryder has shouldered the phone in and out of the shower without getting it wet; he's combed his hair and he's shaving with his sweet little electric. In another minute he'll have to

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unglue his ear from Bobby long enough to wriggle into the Gap T-shirt and the Armani. Once he is armored, he has to go forth and slay multitudes. Reaching for his Calvin briefs, he starts with the day's instructions. Pickups. Folders to be pulled for the next meeting. Calls to be arranged so there may even *be* a next meeting.

Bobby says into the brief silence that falls as his boss ducks into the T-shirt, "Anything else?"

Ryder ticks off ten items for Bobby's phone list — the small private investors they have to squeeze just to keep going until their money kicks in — and right before he pops Bobby out of existence and clicks the phone shut he says, "Find out who's screwing us. Get on it!"

Which leaves Whitney Ryder alone and silent on a peak in Brentwood. In full armor, he stands in the darkened room with the round bed slippery with satin sheets and redolent of Daphne. And broods. The big project up in flames, Daphne gone. Ryder has thirty days to pay up on the house or get out and ten days to cover certain key investments. Stones rolling in to seal the pharaoh's tomb.

It is so fucking *inevitable.*

Doom creeping up, followed by ruin. And all he can fix on is finding out who gave the first stone a kick and started it moving.

Surprised by grief, Ryder belches words: what Bobby was trying to tell him that he didn't want to catch but knows he's going to have to deal with. Our money, he thinks.

We don't even know who our money is.

Questions. Questions! What gives you the right to ask questions?

I just thought maybe the deposit. Um. Ah. Entitled me to a further explanation. Miserable, the client shifts in the deep sofa. This is so hard! Putting it in words. The rage. The humiliation. *I mean, before I tell you my problem.*

The need.

Woman like me, you think I don't know where you're coming from? Honey, this is *Velvet.* You're sitting here, and you think I don't already know your problem?

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Your problem. Your problem. I know more than you do about your little problem. Where it comes from and who did it to you. What you're feeling. Who to get for this. How. I probably even know exactly what you want done to him. The perp that ruined your life. The exquisite torture you want prepared for him.

And count on it, we here at R****** Unlimited know precisely how to make our solution beautiful and specific. A work of art that you will treasure forever, preserved in memory. Tapes if you want, transcripts. Stills. Laminated front page of the *L.A. Times* with an account of it. The whole magilla. Which is, of course, what you are really paying for.

As described in the preliminary, this job's complex, but doable. You can count on our discretion.

But you have reservations, and since you're on our A list, I'll indulge you. Let you in on the A. B. and C. of a few of our major successes. Rest assured, when we do your job, nobody but the target knows who hit him. And, of course, our client, which is why you are paying top dollar. When our targets fall, believe me the world hears about it, but only our clients know how exquisitely it came about or that your victim — yes, let's just come out and say it — *your victim* — knows the why. And who to thank for this beautiful feat of ruination.

Take the studio chief, you know his name. His exec gets hell from the guy because he's quit the studio for something better. Exec quits, right; chief gives him his blessing, right, but all around the poor exec, new partners bail and sure deals start collapsing. Right, the chief is out to get him. So the exec calls us.

You know what happened, it was in all the papers. Bingo-bango, studio's top bankable stars, *things start happening to them*. Car wreck, to say nothing of the fire. Forget reconstructive surgery, there goes half the chief's stable, and on the first day of principal photography. His biggest star goes schizzy, our work — now that you know, you've got to admit that one was especially creative. And untraceable. His three stars that bail to undergo sex change operations and five years of deep therapy, to say nothing of the mudslides that took out the hundred million's worth of stuff they'd built for Kostner's *Iliad plus Odyssey: Aeneid Days*, your complete Troy plus Crete plus various trinkets like the genuine lifesized sandstone face of Abu Cymbal on the back lot annex: director *says:*

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"accept no substitutes, spare no expense," you can imagine. You think it's easy to take out Troy with a mudslide in the dry season?

So that was one.

And that fat presidential wannabe — white hair, bestseller, holier than us until, *sprong*, he goes bats on TV and *in one speech* alienates and loses the votes of the entire moral majority. That was our work. Can't give you any more details because we are pledged to protect the identity of our clients, but you begin to get the scope of our operation?

Not to mention the recent demise of a head of state who shall remain nameless for reasons which I can't share with you even though your own peculiar situation here guarantees your perpetual silence in this sensitive matter.

And you will note that this isn't a punishment-fits-the-crime situation, it is bigger than that. And subtler.

We *take large steps.*

So. The thing. What you want from us?

You will get from us. It's guaranteed.

That's kind of what I'm afraid of. This isn't a big thing, it's a little thing. At least I think it is.

BIG THING? Little thing? Rest assured, we tailor our services to fit the client. I myself originated the program, I and my friend Serena. You think we started big? No way. We started small. All the best things in this town start small, that's the beauty of L.A., you can come in on the rails and ride out in a white stretch with built-in swimming pool.

We weren't always what you see before you. Plush Velvet Martinet Enterprises. Not by a long stretch. Just two nice girls fresh from Fall River, move west to make it in the biz; Serena's an actress, and I...I thought I was writing the script that would kill the world, mega-budget, mega-stars, pickup in ten figures. But for the time being we were only clerks in Bullocks' at the Beverly Center. Serena made buyer, on her way to the top as a manager, and I was selling fucking bras while I worked on my idea — the one I developed with this cute guy I actually thought was really in love with me.

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Then things happened. Little things. Like a clerk in Serena's department gets jumped to department chief, and doesn't she feel shitty. So we deal with the problem. After the accident, Serena's promoted to section manager. Then a friend has a knockdown dragout with a customer and you know how things are, word gets around, and she comes to us. Serena and I deal with the problem, but by that time we are both bored of Bullock's and we set up a small office on Third Street, right next to the bridal shop? You know the corner. And one thing leads to another. Woman standing by the parking meter outside Celine's, fighting with a suit in wraparound Raybans until the guy's car pulls up, the suit gets in the back and zooms off and his girl is left standing there crying. Serena sidles out and next thing she knows, bingo-bango, she's in our office. As it turns out she's a Mafia princess. We were brilliant.

Because let me tell you, okay, the guy in the suit is a lying, two-timing bastard, and if there's one thing we here at R****** Unlimited know, it's how to deal with slimy, scum-sucking, two-timing bottom feeders that lie and take your...

But we were talking about you.

Meanwhile, elsewhere: Whitney Ryder has flipped his plastic onto the waiter's tray at Spago. He and his foreign business contacts have just finished dinner — the early seating. It's so early that nobody who *is* anybody has even thought of arriving, but for the first time in the decade he's been eating here, Ryder has failed to get a window seat. Their table is behind the stairs and entirely too close to the kitchen. Instead of admiring twilight exhaust fumes above Sunset, his Danish guests are gaping like gummy fish in a Jell-O aquarium.

It is testimony to Ryder's precarious position that the only contacts he has left right now are from countries so far away that the news of his imminent demise has not reached them. Annoyingly, the waiter returns and after a murmured exchange leaves with Ryder's other plastic. Across from Ryder, his Danish investors sit, regarding him with unblinking eyes that seem to crack and dry as they wait and go on waiting. Would they please, just *please* excuse themselves and go upstairs to the bathroom? The waiter returns from the register, embarrassed. He grimaces at Ryder. There is a long silence. A looong silence. Finally one of the Danes reaches

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across the table, slipping something into Ryder's hand. Five crisp hundreds. It is humiliating!

It is both logical and terrible that when he goes to the ATM for valet parking money the LCD tells Ryder that in both savings and checking departments, he is functionally a dead man.

WE'VE BEEN SITTING HERE for a long time. A very long time. Do you realize that you've exceeded your deposit in billable hours and we haven't broached the matter of your problem?

No, we haven't. I'd like to tell you everything, but I'm just not quite comfortable.

Oh, don't get all shy on me. We're supposed to be doing business here, and every minute we sit here not laying our cards on the table is costing you another hundred. That's six K an hour, which at the rate we're going is going to be a lot of K if you decide not to go through with the operation. In for a penny, in for the whole deal, so you might as well cut to the chase and let it all hang out for me so we can get started.

You're lucky I cleared my calendar tonight. Otherwise I'd be on my way out the door right now for drinks with my colleagues at the Peninsula before dinner at a place so exclusive that even you have never heard of it. Snuff show at the interval, living party favors, yes it is hot — this week, at least. If I were you I'd get on with this, because every minute we sit here not laying open the spine of this critter is costing you, so I'll tell you a couple of things and then you'd better get ready to tell me a couple of things.

I know how it feels to get stuck sitting on an embarrassing problem. Slide this way, slide that, you're still stuck on a ridge and the damn thing is cutting into you. And don't by any stretch think you're the first person to walk in here with an embarrassing problem.

Or the only person sitting here who's ever had one. I could tell you things...

Okay, okay, I could tell you. Serena? Right, she isn't on the masthead, you noticed, so that's one story. There we were in our little shop on Third,

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me and my first partner; we could barely pay the rent but we were beginning to, you know, get a leg up on the business? A world of people out there, and most of them are hurting. Serena and I did pretty well nickel-and-diming, but no way was I going to spend the rest of my life nickel-and-diming. Remember I was developing this script with my boyfriend, he was going to get us a meeting and *if we could only get a meeting* we could sell it on the basis of the pitch alone, or that's what he told me.

But I forgot to mention the best job that ever came out of R****** Unlimited. We're all too young to remember *The Godfather*, but it's on TV a lot and there is this scene in *The Godfather*? Guy crosses the Don. Wakes up with blood in the bed, reaches down by his feet and there is this severed head, his prize racehorse! And they *slipped it in there so quiet and smooth* that he slept through the night without even knowing that they put this thing in his bed or even feeling it.

Compared to those guys, we here on Wilshire at Little Santa Monica work like ice cream on velvet. If Saddam Hussein has that *funny walk* and keeps his elbows tight to his sides today, if every time he sees a rose or hears somebody humming a certain tune his breath stops, it's because of a little job we did. No no, I can't name the client. I can't even give you the details. I can only tell you if Velvet Martin Enterprises tops the pops in the Fortune Five Hundred, we have earned it.

Serena? I told you! Gone. Left the company. Right, Serena.

I'm sorry, I can't tell you that. What I can tell you, I can only say that by the time I was done with her, Serena wasn't going to be poaching on anybody else's boyfriend, not then, not ever, and she knew what had happened to her and where it was coming from and there's not one damn thing she can do about it, shit, the bitch can't even prove it. *My boyfriend.* And if I...

Sit down! Am I scaring you? Man, that's what you're paying for! You better believe you're lucky to be sitting here. You'd better thank your damn stars that you're knee to knee with a professional with enough guts and fire to scare the crap out of you. And that you can afford it.

All right, all right, I know! But would you please lighten up a little?

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* * *

Meanwhile, elsewhere: It's odd. Now that he's alone in the house again, now that he's downloading the contents of his bulging Filofax on the Bedemeier table, now that he's moving scraps of paper from pile to pile, Whitney Ryder is, not depressed exactly, but thoughtful. On the road to enlightenment. At the moment his train of thought is stalled at a stop midway between suspicion and certainty.

His hands crosshatch the burled wood surface. Whole fucking desk stops being his as of the first. Without having to be told he's finished, Ryder knows he is finished in this town. Still he can't stop moving piles of things to other piles. Sorting. Discarding. This, from Getchell. Nothing, or nothing much.

This from Egil Hoover, forget it.

This, from his money, but he still doesn't know who in hell his money is, much less where were they when his operation went into overcall. All he's got is this phone number printed on a featureless card, that's all, and forget about trying it, they've stopped returning his calls.

When all is said and done, he is left with three items.

This, from Maxamar. Note: *find out tmw. who bought Maxamar.*

And, crumpled almost to extinction, a note scrawled on the back of a grocery receipt. Bobby's hand. And on the back of a Visa receipt, Ryder company plastic, this other note. Daphne. Daphne's illegible smudge crosshatched with the handwriting he knows by heart, Daphne and...

They've cleaned him out.

Son of a bitch! Cleaned him out and scared off his money and now he knows that the two of them are sitting there, wherever there is, sitting there laughing at him, the fucking, fucking...

"I gave you the keys to the store. I took you fucking shopping at fucking Armani and now..." He stands up and howls. "Bobby!"

Everything in him solidifies: Whitney Ryder goes cold and hard. He is resolved. *Son of a bitch.*

Fixed on what he will do to them.

Ms. Martinet, you've been extremely patient. You've told me everything except how you do what you do. But you haven't given me a clue as to how you do it. You...

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* * *

That's the beauty of our operation. Until you state your problem, that remains to be seen. Our madness always fits the method. Sorry, I don't mean to make light of this.

But I was telling you about me. Remember, this is my business and I am the master of my business. Serena, you know about, but the boyfriend, the man I was writing the picture with — okay, you saw it. My baby, my picture! Big budget, major studio, bigtime gross exceeding the net and my name nowhere on it, not in the credits, not in the ads, me nowhere near the bank when the fucker that stole my fucking script waltzed in and took the front money and the pickup plus points, believe it! My boyfriend! And me on the outside, like fucking Lazarus. He and Serena pulled my beautiful, make-me-famous property out from under me and sold it like a Persian rug and I...

What?

Oh, I took care of Serena.

Him? You don't want to know. Suffice it to say that I've been biding my time. Wait. My light's blinking. Call I'm expecting.

Oh, Stephanie. Yes. Put him through to my assistant. Get him here and when you get him here...

Make him wait.

But I was telling you about me. I bide my time. I am the master of this game and all related operations, and you will note that in spite of my own concerns you have my complete attention.

Nothing that happens here happens accidentally. The boyfriend. My scheme — now you will see precisely how good I am at what I do.

He'll be here — wait a minute, the display on this Itchy and Scratchy watch is hard to read — in about three minutes.

Oh, Stephanie. He is? Fine. He can wait until I'm finished with this client. Then he can wait a little longer. When you think he's about to walk, you can buzz him in.

So he's coming in here, he'll be walking in that door some time after I finish taking your particulars and we have the complimentary champagne to seal our arrangement. He'll come in that door well after I open this one and you leave by the Privileged exit. Right, as a preferred customer, you get primo treatment.

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Oh, him? Listen, if he's here tonight it's in spite of the fact that he's got zero deposit and no hope of a downpayment. All he's got is the hunger. But I assure you, I will see him.

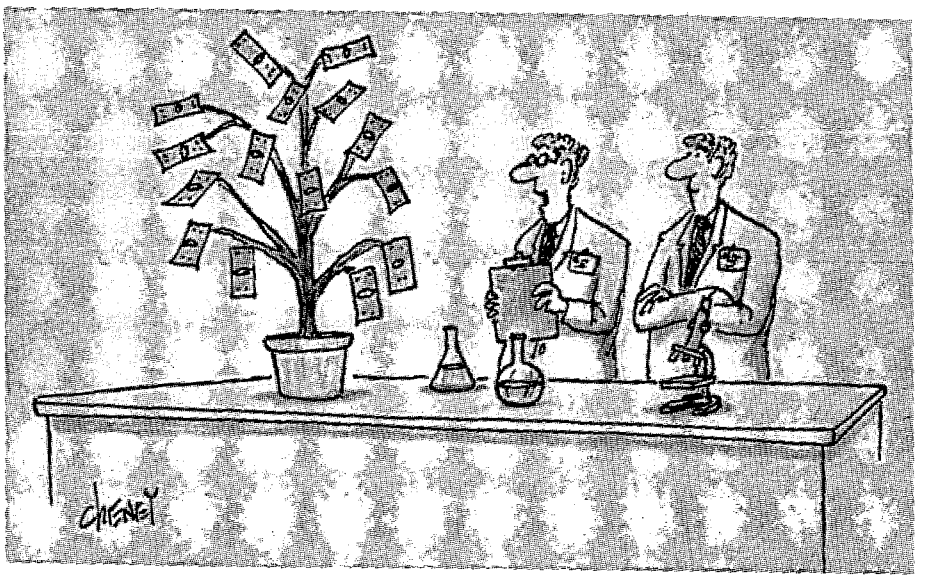
Pissed, he's going to be, desperate and begging for our services; hooked on his own story and so choked up that he'll sob it out before he even focuses on me. Panting for revenge, you dig? Hung up on the unanswered question.

Not the why, okay. The *who*. Who was his money, that drew him out on that limb and then pulled it out from under him. And me?

I'm going to look him in the eye and in the second that falls between eye contact and resignation, he will see everything.

He goes, *You*. And I go:

If you have to ask, you can't afford me.☙



"Well, thanks to genetic engineering, we've solved our funding problem."

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Arthur Porges was born in 1915 and sold his first story in 1951. He gave up his career as a college math teacher in 1957 and has gone on to publish approximately three hundred SF and detective stories. (By his count, his 1953 F&SF story "The Ruum," has been reprinted thirty times.) He notes also that he contributed a few minor discoveries to the field of mathematics, including a novel method of encryption. Mr. Porges underwent quadruple bypass heart surgery last year, but seems to be recovering just fine—he published a story recently in Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine *and has another one due out soon in* Cricket *magazine. This new story pays tribute to our sixteenth President, and to things we've lost.*

Movie Show

(A Story for Lincoln's Birthday)

By Arthur Porges

THERE — THAT'S THE END. Looks like some very bad abstract art, or maybe Mark Twain's cat throwing its famous fit in a platter of tomatoes! If only I'd had the good sense to make a copy immediately, before the cheap film deteriorated, but who could have suspected the old man would do his own amateurish processing instead of sending the movie out? Obviously, he was a very paranoid sort, certain that "They" would steal it, or even come after him with a net on glimpsing his work.

Well, I've kicked myself enough; it won't help, so I'll just give you the facts. Who knows? Maybe someday they'll dig up new data about what really happened in that courtroom, and confirm what I have to believe is true, however wild that is. But, frankly, I doubt it; Elmer Grain was a unique genius, the kind we're lucky to get once a century. Anyhow, here's what happened.

I had some business in Springfield, Illinois, the state capitol. Some relations of mine, people I hadn't seen for years, live there, so naturally I looked them up. The only one who matters in this story is my nephew,

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Joel, a kid of twelve. One of his hobbies is photography, and after a magnificent dinner he set up a projector to show us some of his home movies. The boy's a fine technician for his age, that was clear, but not very imaginative. All he'd taken were shots of the Mississippi, Tom Sawyer's cave, and other familiar scenes of the Mark Twain country.

But then, after about twenty minutes, there came a bit of film that must have been spliced in, and that caught my eye, which had been glazing over. It was some shots of a courtroom, with sunlight streaming in, yet the focusing was pretty bad, the film jerky, the color badly off. So it definitely wasn't Joel's careful work. Besides, it had a soundtrack, and my nephew's movie was silent, being just a scenic take. Come to think of it, I don't really know how they get sound on a movie or camcorder.

But getting back to the strange addition, the place was really packed, and everybody just dripping with perspiration. A Southern Illinois summer can be worse than one in India or on the Equator. I guessed from a magnificent old elm visible — barely — through the dirty windows that the film might have been made in June or July.

There were three people on trial, it seemed, and a judge, a prosecutor, and, of course a defense attorney — or a pair of them; I couldn't decide. Most of this wasn't clear to me at the time, but only much later, as you'll see.

When the chief prosecutor stood up — unfolded himself, almost — to well over six lean feet, obviously the tallest person there by far, my nephew snorted derisively, and said, "That's supposed to be Lincoln: You heard the judge call him Mr. Lincoln. I wonder where Elmer dug *him* up!" I wasn't so negative; there was a kind of resemblance. It occurred to me at the time that there were still enough tall, lanky, loose-jointed young men in Illinois to fit the part.

The sound was awful, and Joel explained that he'd had to improvise by cleverly hooking up to a not-very-good radio. And the actors were no better. We're used to the slick stuff, modern movies with high-tech, surround-sound equipment, which has subtly replaced the slow, stumbling, inarticulate conversations of real life. These people swallowed many of their words, so we couldn't really tell much about the trial. I should add that the man who played Lincoln had a high-pitched voice nothing at all like the organ-tones we're used to in classic movies. And the cast, as a whole, had no sense of theater; they moved about aimlessly,

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blocking each other from the camera, and with none of that controlled grace of professional actors. Lincoln seemed particularly awkward, a clumsy bumpkin. You'd think he was going to pitch forward on his nose any minute. I felt relieved when he sat down next to his partner, whispering something that made the fellow roar with laughter. Yet, in spite of all this, or maybe because of it, the events had a remarkable effect of realism. Looking at the crowded courtroom, I couldn't help wondering what had motivated the old recluse to round up so many extras, and, presumably, pay them, to make this film.

The three accused men were evidently supposed to be terrified of lynching, to judge from the hostility of the spectators who jammed the sweltering room. Certainly, they acted like frightened criminals, huddling together, white-faced, with wide eyes that repeatedly scanned the jury.

The prosecutor was quite ferocious, and hammed up his part, describing in terms no judge would permit today their callous murder of a man named Fisher. He was deliberately inciting the mob, I felt, and it was touch-and-go whether the accused trio would live to get an official sentence.

While the prosecutor's diatribe was going on, Lincoln just sat there, placid, almost smug, a faint smile on his craggy face, which was ugly, yet somehow endearing, so that I suddenly decided Mr. Grain hadn't done such poor casting after all. No beard then, of course; this was the young country lawyer, nothing at all, though, like Henry Fonda. He didn't seem at all concerned about mounting a defense.

Unfortunately, the film broke off long before the trial ended, almost before it was even well under way. There came the slapping of the tag-end against the reel, and Joel turned on the lights.

I immediately cornered the boy and questioned him about the odd bit of movie. It seems the film had been made by an old recluse, one Elmer Grain, who, as I noted earlier, must have been some kind of a genius, who turned out in his garage a host of crazy inventions that probably worked well enough, but had no important applications or economic value, except for one, a very versatile plastic. That he had sold for a big enough sum to let him devote his last years to whatever interested him, which apparently was almost everything nobody else cared about.

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Anyhow, when the old guy died in a fire, Joel found the blistered, blackened tin of film in the Dumpster, and took it home, where he figured out, quite ingeniously, I felt, how to run it and even get words out of the sound-track, a feat that still baffles me, since marks on the edge, near the sprocket-holes, were all he had to work with. That, and a radio. But when it comes to such things, I'm as the brutes that perish, as the Bible — I think — puts it.

At first Joel got no sense from the movie. He guessed it was meant to be a "story" of some kind, but with only a fragment left unburnt, was unable to reconstruct the plot. By a lucky chance, one of his uncles, a history professor at the University of Illinois, came to town, was shown the film, and was cautiously approving of it. He took a dim view of the casting; Lincoln's dialect was overdone, and his suit neither clean nor well-fitted. He was also put off by all the sweating as uncalled-for realism. In short, said the professor, a strictly amateur job of movie-making.

All this increased my own curiosity; I was strangely fascinated by the short film. I couldn't see Grain producing it just for fun; it was inconsistent with what Joel had told me about him; so directly on my return to Chicago I made a point of researching the trial that the old man had appropriated for his film.

The case was an odd one, well-known to Lincoln scholars. It involved the alleged murder of Fisher by the three Trailor brothers. The prosecutor was an ambitious politico named Lamborn. The defense was handled by the firm of Lincoln and Logan.

Well, there was a good reason for Lincoln's smugness while Lamborn waved his arms and flung reckless accusations. Fisher wasn't dead, but just suffering from amnesia, safe in a doctor's care, as Lincoln knew well before the trial. So he just let the prosecutor noose himself, then coolly dropped the gallows' trapdoor, breaking the man's legal neck, so to speak.

But the Trailor case was not the crux of the matter to me; the film itself was, so I went back to Springfield and had Joel run it off again, several times, in fact. I wondered again how Grain had found so many extras, fitted them out in clothes the professor admitted were reasonably vintage, and even found an old courthouse — there are still plenty dating from the 1840s — to film in.

It wasn't until about the fifth showing that I spotted something highly

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significant as a clue to the whole mystery. So far, for obvious reasons, I'd hardly noticed the few objects visible through the dirty windows, but now, running out of clues, I carefully examined them. There was that huge elm I've mentioned, a puzzle in itself; disease has almost eliminated those trees. And, toward the middle of the movie, some birds fluttered down to alight on its branches. It was very atypical of me to overlook them all this time, since I'm a longtime birder, a member of the Audubon Society in good standing. No doubt it was because so much was going on in the courthouse.

Now there are mighty few birds east of the Rockies I can't identify at a glance, but one peek at these shattered my ego. I did a quick, incredulous double-take. There were about forty of them huddled together on the lower branches. They resembled ordinary doves, but just didn't have the right markings. True, they were not in good focus, and the windows far from clean, as noted, but any ornithologist worthy of the name, thanks to Roger Peterson's splendid guidebooks, can tell a bird from its outline, color-scheme, wing-patterns, and similar attributes; only a glimpse is needed. Yet these had me stumped, and I made poor Joel run the film yet again.

Then, as I watched with new intensity, my heart began to pound wildly. Those dovelike forms wheeling and finally alighting in the huge elm suggested something so exciting — and incredible — that I refused to believe my eyes. Joel was gaping at me, but I didn't even try to explain — how could I, when I doubted my own senses?

Almost in a daze, I ran out of the house and rushed to the main library. There I rounded up five of the best, most comprehensive reference books available, even one with Audubon prints. It wasn't an easy puzzle to resolve, because I forced myself to be skeptical, to seek irrefutable evidence. The diagrams, sketches, and careful descriptions of expert naturalists should have been enough, but if not, a faded photo showing a lone bird on its perch in a zoo clinched the matter. It established the truth beyond further question. Fantastic as it must seem, the birds that clustered in that old elm were passenger pigeons! Once they had swarmed in uncounted millions throughout the Mississippi Valley, flocks so large they actually blotted out the sun for hours. But they were massacred for food and sport; the magnificent forests that fed and sheltered them were

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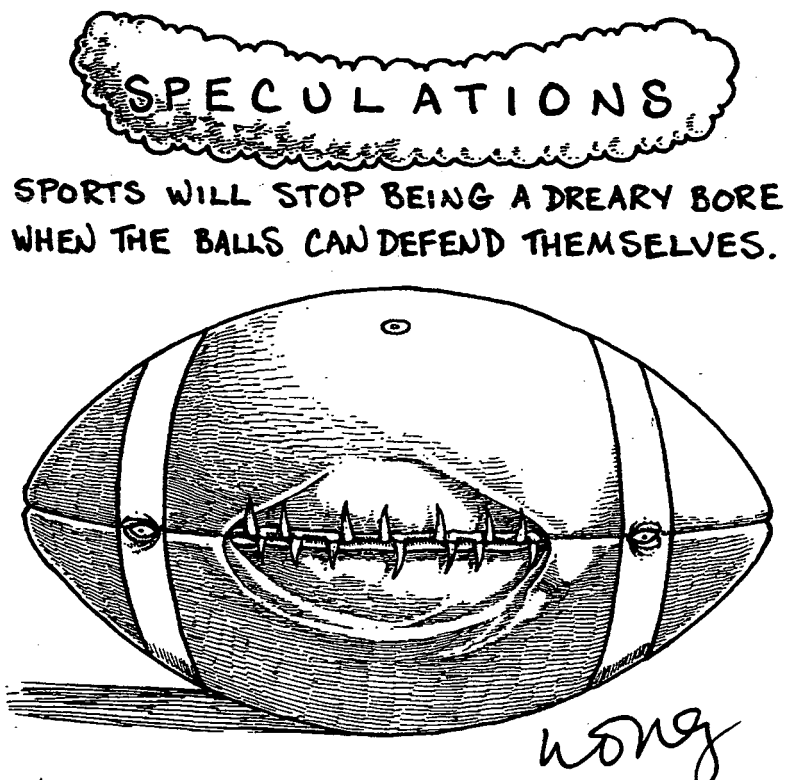
destroyed, and the last of the species died alone, a pathetic little figure in the Cincinnati Zoological Garden, on September 1, 1914, at the age of twenty-two years.

How Grain caught the trial on film — some kind of Time Machine, apparently; what a loss! — we'll never know; and the film itself, incomplete, badly processed, scorched, and mishandled, is now only the colored blurs you saw. The setting, the extras, Lincoln himself, those could have been faked, of course, but not the pigeons — no way!

And looking back on all of it now, I'm not sure which was the more moving, bringing me closer to tears than I've been since I was a child: Lincoln, as he truly was, or that flock of doomed passenger pigeons circling gracefully to alight on the branches of an elm tree in Springfield, Illinois, in the summer of 1841.



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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

As Through a Pair of Mirrorshades Darkly

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

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Thirty-five years ago, the cloistered, complacent world of **science fiction** was rocked by the official birth announcement of a courageous, intelligent, angry new movement, the **cyberpunks**, a group of young writers intent on dragging sf kicking and screaming into the **1980s**, that decade which seemed so turbulent at the time, but which now, in the light of our own era, appears so innocent and easy-going. With the publication of the **anthology** *Mirrorshades*, this bubbling-under revolution in the depiction of the future was forever captured in a single literary snapshot.

The eleven authors — ten men and one woman — immortalized in that 1986 **book** went on to produce a variety of work. But with the advent of new modes of content-production and transmittal, these writers — as well as many others — disappeared from the literary scene, their archaic skills outmoded, their will to write shattered, transformed or displaced, as they witnessed their visions randomly debunked or confirmed. Not one of them managed to survive (in the old-fashioned sense of the word) into the near-term future about which they so famously speculated. They all ultimately met fates which, taken together, constitute a primer in the extensive global changes we have all witnessed over the past three and a half decades.

Here then, in the order in which we encountered these fallible visionaries in *Mirrorshades*, are the follow-up capsule histories of these

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prescient authors who were all paradoxically blindsided by circumstance.

Cheerleader, strategist, and guiding light of the cyberpunks, **Bruce Sterling** always exhibited an extraliterary side to his activities. Cosmopolitan to a flaw, he frequently extolled the virtues of such author-politicians as **Vaclav Havel.** It came as little shock to those who truly knew him that in the Russian elections of the year 2000, shock candidate Sterling, his U.S. citizenship traded for Russian papers, quickly emerged as the front-runner. Elected handily, he soon began to rule the faltering **nation** firmly yet beneficently, pulling his adopted country into the 21st century. Such accomplishments as the Mars mission of 2010 and the Circumarctic Dike System can be laid entirely at his doorstep. But hubris engendered his one fatal misstep: his attempt to change the Russian diet, mandating Texas Bar-B-Q in place of such staples as borsht and potato pancakes. After his assassination by a disgruntled beet farmer, Sterling's preserved body came to lie perpetually in state where Lenin's once reigned.

The sight of **William Gibson** in dreadlocks, his complexion darkened by melanin boosters, a huge spliff in his grip, will instantly be familiar to reggae fans even today. Seduced by the heavy drug scene in his hometown of Vancouver, Canada, Gibson gradually abandoned writing in favor of ardent Rastafarianism and Jamaican music. Going by the nickname "Tuff Deck," Gibson soon had a recording contract with Virgin Records. His subsequent career included such milestones as helping to create the fusion style known as "hillbilly-ska" and recording the Number One Single of 2005, "I and I No Idoru, Mon." Unfortunately, on his Virtual Light Tour of 2009, Gibson fell victim to a fatal jolt of electricity when he absentmindedly attempted to insert a jack into his navel rather than into his guitar.

Few people today recall the noble experiment known as "Chemical Schooling." Yet it was in this brave but misguided effort that **Tom Maddox** met his doom. Intent on raising the educational achievements of American youth, Chemical Schooling represented the first crude attempts at today's brilliant drugs. Attempting to prep for an upcoming semester, Maddox accidently ingested an overdose of **semiotics** pills. In itself, this would have been crippling but not

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necessarily fatal; however, the overdose left Maddox with an overwhelming compulsion to smoke Gitanes and drink espresso, and he quickly succumbed to massive nicotine and caffeine poisoning. A memorial chair at a Paris café has been endowed in his name.

Lone annointed female cyberpunk **Pat Cadigan** had by the '90s expatriated herself to **London.** Initially, this seemed a wise and healthy move. But Cadigan had not reckoned with changing climactic conditions. After the Great Flip of 2009, when London began to be submerged by rising sea levels, Cadigan refused to leave her beloved city. "I'm gonna ride this out like a **Ballard** protagonist," she was quoted as defiantly saying. In the general crazed exodus, the stubborn Cadigan's whereabouts became hazy, even her continued existence in doubt. After a decade, she has been transformed into an iconic, mythic figure, "The Lady of the Thames." Brave souls exploring the aquatic ruins of Mother London claim to have seen her gaunt and shrouded apparition poling a skiff through the urban channels while singing "Cockles and Mussels, Alive, Alive-O."

The first of the governing **City Brains** that enjoyed a brief vogue were all patterned on human intelligences. The AI for the San Francisco-San Jose district had **Rudy Rucker** as its template. (Rucker was chosen for this honor as he lay in the hospital suffering from terminal Mandelbrot's Fever contracted from overexposure to fractals. Only humans soon to die were allowed to become artificial intelligences, thus avoiding legal problems of duplicate identity and ownership, etc.) At first, the Rucker AI proved very moderate and capable in its governance of the metroplex. But then strange orders began to issue forth: memorization of Kerouac's *On the Road* was to be mandatory for **high-school graduation; Frank Zappa**'s "Peaches En Regalia" replaced "The Star-Spangled Banner" at official functions; and so on. Only after a tremendous struggle between citizens and the capricious cyberpunk-on-a-chip, with the Rucker AI employing civic robots in its defense, was the rogue silicon freestyler disabled. Videotaped as its boards were pulled, even today the AI can be heard plaintively singing in diminuendo "Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz."

Having moved into the **videogame** industry in the '90s, **Marc Laidlaw** was eager to participate in the post-2005 revolution in

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that field. Unable ever to achieve satisfying virtual reality, the game industry chose to blame their failure on the unreasonable human demand for hi-res 3-D input. Various firms began to offer neurosurgical operations allowing players to see the real world in familiar lo-res pixel form, complete with special effects. Large theme parks simulating famous videogames were built, and the players turned loose. Naturally, the programmers and writers had to undergo this same operation in order to develop the parks effectively. Laidlaw's demise came when, attempting to "reach a new level," he jumped from his tenth-floor apartment onto a "magic mushroom" below his window that proved to be a passerby's umbrella.

James Patrick Kelly nel r intended to search for **Champie**, the legendary atavistic monster of Lake Champlain. But a simple fishing trip in 2003 proved his undoing, as Champie, attracted by Kelly's unusual choice of bait — champagne-marinated caviar — surfaced alongside Kelly's canoe and swallowed both boat and fisherman. This meal brought on Champie's own death, and the recovered corpse was opened to reveal that Kelly had survived for a short time within the monster, just long enough to compose a final story on his durable laptop, "In the Belly of the Beast," which went on to win that year's **Nebula, Hugo,** and **Field and Stream** awards.

Accidentally stepping into a pool of "gray goo" during the famous **Seattle Scum Splash** of 2016 opened up a new way of living for **Greg Bear**. After absorption, his intelligence now resided in a million tons of aggressive protean undifferentiated protoplasm. Reining in the monstrous formerly nonsentient blob earned Bear the **Congressional Medal of Honor** as well as exile to the Mojave Desert. Once penned by an acid-filled moat in his sandy Coventry, Bear became a prime tourist attraction and continues right up to the current day to amuse children and adults alike with his various Jell-O, blancmange, and **Rush Limbaugh** impressions.

Becoming fascinated with **Deep Ecology, Lewis Shiner** arrived at a point where he abandoned job and family to become a monkey-wrenching eco-guerrilla. His legendary career protecting Mother Gaia reached a climax when he singlehandedly sabotaged further development of the Amazon Rain Forest by introducing a bioengineered defense against human predation: Organic **Muzak**. Implanted

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in vegetation and animals, the virus-borne circuitry that allowed animals and trees to emit Muzak insured that humans would remain far away from the ear-assaulting forest, whereas other forms of life would not be bothered. But Shiner, his GPS unit broken while he sought to leave the Amazon, became lost amid the cacophony and quickly succumbed to his own deadly defense.

How many times before their actual arrival had science fiction predicted the advent of "the feelies," entertainment that offered tactile sensations to the audience? Few people would have guessed that **John Shirley** would be instrumental in helping perfect this medium. As Hollywood ramped up to introduce this entertainment option, the moguls discovered that test subjects were hard to come by. Sure, everybody wanted to test the porno options, but few people were willing to undergo the alpha software for the slasher or combat feelies. Enter Shirley, notoriously open to any and all experiences. By becoming Subject Number One in Hollywood's grand drive to perfect the feelies, Shirley allowed the experts to calibrate their effects. But a few years of this intense nervous-system stimulation proved too much for even the life-hardened Shirley, and he ended his days comatose in a sensory-deprivation tank.

After publishing his final "humor" column, "As Through a Pair of Mirrorshades Darkly," **Paul Di Filippo** vanished without a trace.

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A native Californian now living in Fullerton, Stephen Woodworth is a First Place winner of the Writers of the Future Contest. His stories have appeared in a handful of anthologies and magazines, including Aboriginal SF, Hot Blood, Dead of Night, *and* After Shocks. *He also enjoys acting in local theater and says he was visible "for approximately three nanoseconds" as an extra in an episode of* Star Trek: The Next Generation.

Steve's first story for us, like much of his fiction, explores issues of gender and self. It's edgy and a bit grotesque and delivers some good shocks.

Her

By Stephen Woodworth

SHE WAS ESPECIALLY anxious that day. I could feel her eyes blinking and rolling in the back of my head, sticky corneas scraping against the inside fabric of my long-haired wig. Sweat dampened her upper lip as her jaws strained against the duct tape I had used to seal her mouth.

She knew where we were. She knew my thoughts, just as I knew her fear.

"Extraordinary," Dr. Vickers murmured, the circular lenses of his glasses shining and opaque as silver dollars. "May I see the...?" He made a euphemistic gesture with his hand.

I looked away and said nothing. Taking that as a yes, he stood and moved from behind his large mahogany desk to where I sat. Without waiting for me to assist him, he ran his long, spindly fingers through the hair at my temples, seeking the bobby pins which fastened the false locks to the thatch of real hair that ran across the top of my head. He peeled off

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the hairpiece as if it were a surgical dressing, and I shut my eyes in sympathy as the sudden light blinded her.

Dr. Vickers drew a sharp breath. "Extraordinary!" Leaning close, he touched her cheek with one manicured finger, and I fought to keep her still as the sealed scream ballooned in her mouth. Though my back was to him, I could see him through her eyes — a peering, prodding, white-coated gnome.

He pulled a penlight from his coat pocket, and flashed it in both of her eyes. Then I felt his fingernail pick at the tape at one corner of her mouth. I grabbed his wrist.

"Don't."

He shook free of my grasp. "Mr. Harris, if I'm going to help you, you'll have to trust my judgment."

I swallowed. "Can you get rid of it?"

His lips parted, then closed again before he answered, and I should have known right then that he'd be no more help than the others. "Your...anomaly is, to my knowledge, utterly unique. However, I think with sufficient study — "

"Now. I want it *gone*." I tensed as I felt her writhe inside our skull. "I have money."

He regarded me with the restrained impatience of a schoolmaster. "Mr. Harris, if we attempt such a radical operation without proper analysis, it would almost certainly kill you."

I carefully replaced my hairpiece and pressed it down. "If that's what it takes," I said. I rose and strode out of his office.

I didn't see Elle that night. We were supposed to have dinner together at Pizza Hut, but I called and told her I didn't feel good. It wasn't really a lie.

When I got off the phone, I went into the bathroom and turned on the tub's hot water tap full bore. As the tub filled, I stripped naked and regarded myself in the mirror. Not a bad body. An angular chest fringed with hair, muscular arms, a little slack in the gut from too much red meat and chocolate. And the face — normal, maybe even handsome.

The face of an ordinary man.

I glanced at the hand mirror which I kept face down beside the sink, the way a suicide keeps a loaded gun in the house. I ripped off the wig and

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snatched up the hand mirror, angling it so as to glare at her reflection in the wall mirror. It's the only way we can see each other.

There were similarities between us, a sort of family resemblance. The shape of the eyes, the curve of the nose. But this face had a finer bone structure, smoother, smaller-pored skin, a delicacy of expression that could only be a woman's. And everyone who had seen it recognized it for what it was.

She saw the hate in my stare and averted her eyes. I slapped the hand mirror down on the counter, but still felt the drip trickle down her cheek. The steam misting the wall mirror blurred my image to a pink smear.

The water in the tub stung my foot as I stepped in. I lay back, the heat pricking my skin with needles of pain, until everything but my face was submerged. Like bottled messages, little, frantic bubbles streamed past my ears to burst on the surface. I shut my eyes, and waited for them to stop.

She wouldn't drown, though. I knew that from experience.

I finally took Elle out a week later. It went badly. I was late, the restaurant was slow, the movie was a dog. All evening, my head throbbed as if the scalp had shrunk over my cranium, compressing the brain within.

Afterward, I pulled up in front of the house Elle shared with her roommates, but let the engine idle a moment to cover my embarrassed silence.

"You look like you hated that flick even more than I did," Elle said as I switched off the ignition. She wore a wry smirk, and her gray-blue eyes flickered with either amusement or irritation.

I rubbed my forehead. "Yeah, sorry about that."

"Lee?" She brushed her knuckles along my forearm. "You okay?"

"Sure."

I'd seen Dr. Vickers again, let him take X-rays and run some tests. Too risky, he concluded. Inoperable. Perhaps with more time...

Just like all the others.

"Would you like to come in for a while?"

Elle's voice lilted suggestively. The light from the old mercury-vapor street lamp outside frosted her frizzy blond hair, and her baggy flannel shirt had slipped open to reveal the shadowed swell of her right breast.

I sighed. "I'd like to, but..."

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She leaned closer until I could smell the crushed-petal scent of her perfume, feel her breath on my cheek. "But?"

"Ahh...work's got me twisted." I figured she'd heard me bitch enough about life at the warehouse that she'd let it go at that.

"Maybe you need to relax." She planted a kiss on my lips. Her hands clasped my cheeks, then slid up to stroke my hair. My twin's nose twitched beneath Elle's fingers, as if trying to suppress a sneeze.

I flinched, bumping my head against the driver's side window, and brushed her hands away. "Elle, I *told* you — "

She gave an exasperated groan. "Shit, is this the toupee thing again? Get over it! In fact..."

She reached, and I had to clutch my wig to keep her from snatching it away. "Elle! Stop!"

She drew a sharp breath, then relented. "Okay." She collected her purse and opened the passenger door. "It's been real, and it's been fun..."

"...but it hasn't been real fun," I said in chorus. It was her favorite snide exit line. "I know. Sorry."

She smiled one of her equivocal smiles, then gently squeezed my arm. "'Night."

I still felt that tender pressure as I sagged against the steering wheel after she'd gone. It was those tiny gestures of warmth that made me see Elle's face on my bedroom ceiling at night.

And I was losing her, one *faux pas* at a time.

The following morning, I started searching for another surgeon.

I WAS SEVEN YEARS OLD when I heard her cry for the first time. Until then, she'd been merely another appendage, a deformity which my parents made me keep hidden, like a wart or a boil.

My friends and I were playing football on the front lawn of my house. Sid hiked the ball to me, and I charged forward. A moment later, hands grasped me from behind, and I was falling.

"Holy shit!" Tommy backpedaled from where he'd tackled me, flinging away the tousled wig in his hand as if it were a dead rat.

"Lee wears a wi-ig! Lee wears a wi-ig!" John-John, Sid's little brother, taunted. He hadn't seen what Tommy had.

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Pete, Sid, and the others moved to surround me, leaving the forgotten football on the ground. She looked up at them with blinking, fearful eyes, and I could see their silhouettes eclipse the noontime sun.

"Jesus, what is it?" Pete whispered.

"It's a face, stupid, what does it look like?" Sid answered.

"It's a *girl's* face!" John-John pointed, bouncing on his heels excitedly. "It's a *girl's* face!"

On his feet again, Tommy had joined the circle. "He's a goddamn freak! A faggy little girl-boy!"

I pushed myself up, and they all backed off a step. With both pairs of eyes open, I could see almost a full 360 degrees, and it made me dizzy. A ring of faces tightened around me, leering and chanting. "Girl-boy! Girl-boy! Faggy little girl-boy!"

I spun left and right, shouting. "Shut up! Shut up!"

Then I heard her hiccupping sobs.

That really set them off. "Oh, look! She's crying! Don't cry, little girl-boy! Little sissy! Little faggot!"

I felt tears stream down burning cheeks, and was furious that I couldn't stop them. I wanted to cry myself, but I converted my shame to anger and shoved Tommy as hard as I could. *"STOP IT!"*

He tottered but kept his feet. He clamped his left hand on my forearm until it bruised the skin, then thrust his right fist into my gut. I hunched over, gasping for breath, and he pushed me down. With the others cheering around us, Tommy sat astride my stomach and grabbed hold of my head, grinding my girl-face into the ground. Her shrill wail died, and I tasted the grass and dirt on her tongue. Yet I felt glad, because she was getting what she deserved for humiliating us.

Then, all at once, the jeering stopped. Tommy got off me, and I saw my father looking down on me, his face flushed, his pants and shirt still covered with sawdust from his workshop.

Relieved, I stood and started to brush off my Tuffskins, expecting him to cuss out the other boys for teasing me. Instead, he grabbed the collar of my shirt.

"Come on," he muttered and yanked me toward the front door. He didn't spare a glance at the others, kept his gaze down as if afraid of them. I couldn't see anything behind me, and realized she must have shut her eyes.

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Once inside the house, Dad seized my shoulders and leaned forward to shout in my face. "What the hell were you doing out there? Didn't I tell you to be careful?"

"Yeah." I wanted to tell him that I only played football because it was his favorite sport, and I really hated the game. Instead, I just stared down at my shoes.

"'Yeah?' Is that all you have to say? Do you have any idea — " His breath caught in his throat, as if a pressure valve had tightened in his chest. He wiped a hand over his face, and calmed himself enough to go on. "We're gonna have to move, I hope you know. Daddy's gonna have to quit his job, we're gonna have to sell the house, and move to some state where no one knows us and start all over again — "

"Don't you think you're overreacting?" Mom asked, her voice barely audible. She'd withdrawn to a far corner of the den, where she stood hugging herself. "I mean, it was just a bunch of kids — "

He turned on her with the suddenness of a cobra. "And no one's gonna believe them, right? The hell they won't! We'll have goddamn TV crews on our doorstep within a week. All wanting to see the local freak!"

Mom's mouth shrank to a tiny oval. "Jim, don't..."

"Christ, seven years! Seven years, I managed to keep this under wraps so he could live some kind of normal life, and now — " He sliced the air with his arm. "I don't know, Claire, maybe we should just sell him to the circus. Would you like that, Lee? Dress you in a little tutu and sit you on an elephant — "

"Stop it! Just stop it!" Mom shrieked. "He's still our son!"

Dad gave an arid laugh. "Yeah. My *son*." He glowered at me. "Go to your room."

I went and buried myself between the Star Wars sheets on my bed. Dad began shouting at Mom again.

Then I heard *her* start to whimper.

I wrapped my pillow around my head and squeezed. "Shut up, shut up, shut up..."

As Dad promised, we moved within a month, living in an apartment until escrow closed on our new house. In our new neighborhood, in my new school, with my new friends, I was very, very careful. I did all the normal things the other boys did, and even took up football again. The

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game felt much better with a shiny, hard helmet on. The locker room could be a problem, but I had a good shoulder-length wig and lots of bobby pins. By senior year, I was a starting half-back and a letterman.

Dad died of a coronary the year I started college. I didn't cry at his funeral. I think he would have been proud of me.

Of course, I'd dated girls from the time I was fourteen, got laid by the time I was sixteen. It was expected. I warned them about my hairpiece, told them I got burnt in a fire as a kid and that I was ashamed of my bare, scarred scalp. If, after the first month or two, they said they wanted to see anyway, to know me better, I simply left.

Until Elle.

She lay beside me in the downtown park, the crumpled bag containing the remains of our Subway sandwiches between us. It was late February, and we basked in the first real California-style sunshine of a gray and rainy winter. Elle had cut two of her Master's history classes for the occasion.

"Isn't this marvelous?" She stretched languidly and ruffled her hair. The hem of her T-shirt came untucked from her jeans, revealing a strip of her tummy. Her belly button was unique — neither an innie nor an outie, but nearly level with the surface of her skin. I fought the temptation to touch it right then. "Days like this I wish I could just lie here forever." She pointed her bare toes like a ballet dancer, letting the blades of grass tickle up between them.

"Yeah." I sat with my elbows on my knees, twisting the stem of a dandelion in my fingers, and I strained to think of something romantic to say, scanning the vacant blue sky for inspiration.

Suddenly restless, Elle sat up and peered at the grass around her as if looking for a lost contact lens. "I remember coming here as a kid. They used to have ducks in the pond over there." She pointed, then resumed her search. "Mom would let me bring bread scraps for 'em — ah!" She plucked a tiny clover flower and held it to her ear, threading the stem through her pierced lobe. The flower stayed as she pulled her hand away and grinned. "Ta-da!"

I chuckled, and it eased the tightness in my chest. Still, I didn't know what to say, and there was a tension in my limbs, as if my body knew what I was supposed to do and wanted to go on without me.

"Wait! Let's see if I can still do this..." Elle leapt to her feet and

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bounded off to the left about ten yards. With a running start, she turned cartwheels in front of me, golden hair tumbling, and I longed to be like her, to skip and dance and do handsprings in the sunlight and not care who was watching or what they thought.

The last thing I remember doing that afternoon was taking off my shoes.

I next became aware of a rhythmic clacking sound and the smell of melting butter. My vision faded in, and I found myself standing in the kitchen of my apartment holding a stainless steel bowl in one hand and a fork in the other. I watched as my hand used the fork to beat the eggs in the bowl. Though I willed it to stop, it continued on autopilot. Behind me, a woman's voice hummed a cheerful tune.

"Elle?" I called, my tongue sluggish.

The woman's voice stopped.

At the same time, my hands went slack, as if they forgot what they were doing, and the fork and bowl clattered to the floor, spattering my jeans with raw egg.

"Shit!" I staggered back from the upset bowl, now bleeding yolk onto the linoleum. I gaped around in confusion, saw the frying pan over a low flame on the stove, the bowls of grated cheese and sliced mushrooms on the counter beside it.

"Elle!" I checked the living room and bedroom. I was alone.

A tremor ran through me. I grabbed the back of my head and felt her bare cheeks, her soft lips.

The duct tape was gone.

She'd been in control for hours, I thought, shaking. Seeing with my eyes, speaking with my voice. I ran to the phone and dialed Elle's number, trying to steady my breathing as I waited for her to answer.

"Hello?"

"Hi. It's me." I didn't know whether to apologize or what, and I feared she'd hang up the moment she heard me.

"Hey." Her voice was warm and inviting, and I could sense the smile that accompanied it.

"Look, about this afternoon..."

She giggled. "As I recall, the hide-and-seek was your idea. I hope I wasn't too hard to find."

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I rubbed my forehead, straining to remember. "Did — did you have a good time?"

"No." She paused. "I had a great time. I just wish I didn't have this mid-term tomorrow so I could've stayed for dinner. You left me hungry," she added with a sensual purr.

"Thanks." I forced a chuckle, gnawing at my lower lip.

"Lee? Is something wrong?"

"No. No, I just wanted to tell you what a great time I had. We should do it again sometime." My mouth twisted. "Love you."

There was a long pause at the other end, and I thought, *Oh, shit, that did it.*

"I love you, too."

My heart clenched. "Call me tomorrow," my mouth said. "Let me know how the test went."

"Okay."

She said good-bye, and I hung up, a queasiness in my stomach.

That feeling remained with me during the following week, the feeling you have in dreams where you find yourself naked out in public. I became acutely self-conscious of all my actions and mannerisms — how I walked, how I sat, how I spoke. Whenever I found myself drifting off into daydreams, I flinched and glanced at my watch to see how much time I'd lost. At night, I slept with my jaws clenched shut, the tension giving my mind some concrete sensation to grasp as my consciousness slipped away. I often woke with a headache, which also helped to anchor me in my skull.

For once, I appreciated the donkey-work of the warehouse. Fetching case after case of ceramic tile for the orders we had to fill, listening to the rest of the crew describe in pornographic detail the women they'd slept with over the weekend, I settled into a comfortable groove of mindless motion.

"So what about you, man?" Scott asked out of the blue. A spindly bean-pole of a guy whose arms jutted out of his Lakers jersey like bent soda straws, he'd just finished telling us about his fifth conquest in as many weeks. "Getting anywhere with La Belle Elle?"

I stood on the penultimate rung of a twenty-foot ladder, scanning the shelves for a stock number, so it took me a second to realize he was talking

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to me. "Huh? Oh, yeah, Elle's fantastic." I slid a thirty-pound box off a shelf, bracing my shins against the ladder's top step as I swayed with the weight. "We had a wild time in the park last Thursday," I added, descending with the box. It might have been true, for all I could remember about that day.

"All right! The kid has hisself some nookie!" Tony, a burly weightlifter with a spiky black crewcut, clapped and whistled.

Grinning, Scott took the box from me as I got off the ladder and set it on the pallet we'd stacked with the latest order. "About time, too. We were beginning to wonder about you, boy."

I glared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Hey, we've all seen you looking at Tony's ass, okay?" He winked at Tony. They both laughed.

"So what are you saying?" I snapped.

Scott saw the expression on my face, and his shit-eating grin disappeared. "Uh, nothing."

"No, come on. Tell me."

He shrugged and smiled nervously. "Take it easy, man, it was just a joke..."

"But there must be something about me to make fun of, right?" My voice quavered on the point of cracking. "Tell me what's so goddamn funny."

Scott backed off a step and held up his hands. "Nothing. Just a joke."

I looked over to see Tony and Carlos glance away, hastily shifting their attention to the boxes at their feet.

"Shit," I muttered, and climbed the ladder again.

I worked in silence for the rest of the afternoon, sifting my memory to find any lapses I'd had at work during the past week. If she'd taken control...if Scott and the others had seen me when she was in control...My face burned as I imagined their contemptuous stares and suppressed laughter.

I brooded in silence at the dinner table that night. Elle had come over to my apartment to cook for me in her latest attempt to convert me to vegetarianism — lentil soup and French bread. Though it tasted fine, I stirred the pasty, greenish soup without an appetite, staring at the swirls I made.

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Elle cast a withering look at me from across the table. "That good, eh?"

"Hmm? No, no, it's great." Guilty, I shoveled a spoonful into my mouth and nodded my appreciation.

"Thanks," she said dubiously. She stared into her own bowl for a while. "Is it my breath," she asked at last, "or my scintillating conversation?"

"What?"

"You! You're in a funk."

"I am not! I'm just...thinking." I took a big bite of bread to chew on as an excuse not to talk.

"About...?" With a sarcastic smile, Elle gestured for me to elaborate. "Let's verbalize here."

Gooseflesh rose on my arms as her jaws strained at their seal. I shook my head, both to dismiss Elle's question and to reassert my control. "Just...a bad day at work."

Elle's expression softened. "The boss?"

"Nah, it's the other guys. They're all assholes." I rubbed my forehead.

"Have you thought about getting a better job? You have a degree..."

"Yeah, and the private sector's clamoring for art history majors."

"That's not the point. It shows what you can do — "

"Elle, I'd really rather drop this."

"Okay, okay." She eyed me thoughtfully as she took a couple more mouthfuls of soup, then waggled her empty spoon at me. "You know what *you* need — "

She dropped the spoon in her bowl and rose from her chair. "Stand up."

"What? I — "

She crossed to my chair. "Come on. Elle says, 'Stand up.'"

With a sigh, I abandoned my own soup and did as she commanded.

"Now, Elle says, 'Stand over there.'" She pointed to the center of the living room floor.

I went to the indicated spot and shrugged.

"Elle says, 'Take off your shirt.'"

I groaned. "Elle, I'm not in the mood — "

She gave me a schoolmarmish glare, arms akimbo, tapping her foot.

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I chuckled in spite of myself, unbuttoned my shirt, and slipped it off. "Now what, Mistress?" I asked, tossing the shirt aside.

She giggled. "On your belly, slave."

I lay face-down on the carpet as she came and crouched beside me. "Is this going to hurt?"

"Just a little." She straddled my butt and began to knead the muscles of my back with her fingers. "Man, you're tight. No wonder you're on edge."

I winced as she rubbed the taut cords of my shoulders. Her hands pulled the tension from my body, and I let out a soft moan. For the first time that evening, I forgot about the warehouse, about Scott and Tony, about *her*, and lost myself in the present, in Elle's firm but tender touch.

"That's it," she murmured. "Just let it all go."

My chin resting on my hands, I drifted into a light doze. I only awoke when the gentle rocking motion of the massage abruptly stopped.

"How did you do that?" Elle asked.

Groggy, I scowled and half-opened my eyes. "Do what?"

"Your scalp...*moved* — "

Before my sluggish brain understood what she meant, Elle had worked her fingers up underneath the padding of my wig.

"No — !" I yelped as the bobby pins were yanked from my hair, and tried to wriggle out from under her, but I knew it was too late.

Though she was still behind me, I could now see her awestruck face, see the wig in her hand. Elle's mouth hung open, but the high-pitched, feminine whimper I heard stirred in my own throat.

Elle stood and staggered backward, staring at me in confusion. "What *are* you?"

I rolled on my back like an overturned turtle and lurched forward onto my knees. Elle shrank from me as I stood and stretched an arm toward her. "Wait! Please — "

"My God...what *is* it?" Dropping the wig, Elle stumbled back into the dining room and sank onto a chair, her hands pressed over her mouth.

"It — it's just a birth defect. Like a — an extra finger or something." I knelt in front of her and took her hands in mine. "I'm sorry. I couldn't tell you, I was so afraid — "

"Turn around." Her voice was hoarse, her face stony and pale.

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I squeezed her hands before releasing them, then did as she said. Quivering, I shut my own eyes and met Elle's tremulous gaze with those other eyes.

Elle reached to touch my twin's cheek, but her finger hovered just above the skin as if repelled by magnetic force. "Does she talk?"

"No." A shiver rippled up my spine. "Just some noises. Sometimes she laughs. Cries."

Elle stared into my twin's eyes, a look of strange, fearful recognition on her face. "*No.*"

She pushed herself to her feet and fumbled for the purse which sat on an adjacent chair. "I'm — I've got to go."

I jerked upright and caught hold of her arm as she headed toward the front door. "No, don't leave! I promise, you'll never have to see it again."

She tensed, and refused to look at me. "I can't — I'm sorry..."

I let go of her, and she hurried out the door.

I stood there for almost a minute, my fists like matching hammers pressed to my temples. Then I reached back and ripped the duct tape off her mouth.

This time I wanted to hear her.

I leaned up against the wall and bowed my head. With a sharp cry, I jerked my head upright to crack it against the concrete. When she shrieked, I did it again. And again, until the flesh at the back of my skull stung with bruised tissue. The two of us screamed in harmony.

About twenty minutes later, a heavy-set cop with squarish, wire-rimmed glasses rang my doorbell. I answered the door in a bathrobe, skin still clammy from the shower, my wig disheveled but in place.

The cop shifted his gaze from my face to peer past me into the living room. "Sorry to bother you, Mister..."

"Harris."

"Mister Harris. We received a call about a possible domestic violence incident in this apartment complex, and wanted to know if you'd seen or heard anything."

I shrugged and shook my head. "Sorry. Can't help you."

"Mind if I come in for a sec?"

"Sure." I stepped aside to let him enter.

"Someone apparently heard a woman cry out. Said it sounded like it

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came from in here." He made a cursory inspection of the living room, then ambled toward the open bedroom door.

"Not here. I live alone."

"Have any guests this evening?" He surveyed the dual place-settings of dirty dishes on the dining room table.

"My girlfriend. She left some time ago, though."

"Uh-huh." He casually poked his head into the bedroom and bathroom as if admiring the decor. "Well, it seems pretty quiet now." He moved back toward the front door. "Like I said, sorry to bother you, but we have to check these things out."

"No problem." Beneath the wig, a trickle of blood ran from her broken nose, over her swollen lips and scraped chin to drip down my back. "You can't be too careful."

I called in sick at work the following morning and spent most of the day in bed with the curtains drawn. The telephone didn't ring. About four o'clock, I got up, went to the bathroom in my boxer shorts, and picked up the hand mirror on the counter.

Her face hung slack, as if anaesthetized, her eyes shut, her lips slightly parted. Though I hadn't replaced the duct tape, she hadn't made a sound since last night. Her nose had stopped bleeding, but was puffy and crooked. Her cheeks were blotched with purple. I touched one of the tender spots, but she didn't react. I lifted one eyelid, but the iris beneath seemed clouded, vacant.

An unexpected tremor of fear trilled through me — the same sort of panic you feel when you fall asleep on your arm and awake in the middle of the night to find that your hand has become a lump of lifeless meat.

I stayed home the next two days as well, drowning my brain in daytime television. I risked getting fired, but I didn't care. Every evening at eight I called Elle's number. Her answering machine always responded, and each time I remained silent, leaving an eloquent span of blank tape after the beep.

I didn't expect to see her again. I certainly didn't expect her to pound on my door after eleven o'clock on Saturday night.

As I inched the door open, she looked at me over the taut door chain with the guilty expression of a child who has either done something bad or is about to. "Can I come in?"

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I rubbed the beard stubble on my cheeks as if to wipe it off and patted down the cowlicks in my wig. "Uh...sure."

I undid the chain and let her in, shifting my feet as she saw the litter of Budweiser cans and Doritos bags surrounding the easy chair in front of my living room TV. "I'm sorry. I wasn't expecting..."

"I know. I should've called, but...I wasn't sure." She hugged herself. "I missed you."

"I missed you, too." We fell into an exhausted embrace.

Her lips brushed my ear as I nuzzled her neck. "I want to see her again," she whispered.

This time, it was my turn to recoil in revulsion. "What? Why on Earth — "

Her hands fluttered, trying to speak for her. "I — I can't explain. There's something I have to see." She drew close again, her eyes imploring. "Something I have to know."

I wilted against her, gripping her to my chest, figuring that I would lose her no matter what I did.

We went into the bedroom and knelt on my futon. Jaw set, I sat with marble stoicism and let her take off the wig once more. I felt a perverse relief when I heard Elle gasp, for the anxiety and uncertainty would finally be gone. They would leave with Elle.

Elle lightly prodded one of the bruised cheeks, and I winced. "My God, what did you do?"

"We had a little fight."

"Is she — ?"

"I don't know."

Elle traced a fingertip over the peach-tender skin, her breath coming in ragged sighs. "She *can't* be."

A fatalistic sorrow drained the tension from my limbs, and my vision clouded. I blinked to clear the mistiness from my sight, and when I looked again, everything had snapped into sharp focus and I found Elle's face hovering directly in front of me. I saw again all those qualities in her I had loved and coveted — her inner strength and outward tenderness, her sensuality and sensitivity — and it made me want to weep. The breeze-soft touch of her fingers served as a balm to the dull soreness of my wounds.

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Elle peered into my eyes, and again recognition dawned on her face. "It *was* you," she breathed. "In the park — you had that same look..."

My mouth opened, but I couldn't find my voice. Perhaps I was afraid to hear it.

Then Elle pressed her lips to mine, and I no longer needed to speak.

Our mouths and tongues moved in perfect counterpoise, now giving, now receiving, gently enough so that the sting of my grazed skin became only a tingle. I kissed her neck, and Elle unbuttoned her blouse.

As I bent to lick at the breasts she offered to me, though, my backward body lost its balance and almost tipped over, my misdirected arms flailing out behind me, groping for something to hold onto. Elle steadied me, laughing. I giggled in return.

Peeling off her clothes, Elle nudged me into a prone position, my body belly-down on the mattress, my frontward face smothered in a pillow, inert and immobile as a discarded mask. Elle crawled over me, letting me make love to each part of her in turn. Sitting up, she arched her thighs over my face and dipped her pubic mound onto my waiting mouth, shuddering as I explored inside her with my tongue.

We lay beside each other for a long time after it was over, communicating only with our eyes. Though I wanted to watch her placid sleeping form all night, I eventually drifted off.

I awoke later as if jarred by a sudden sound. The room was still dark. Instinctively, my hand went to my jaw, where I felt my bristly, unshaven skin. I peered out once more from behind my male face and frowned, wondering if I'd only dreamt the last few hours.

"Love me," a soft voice croaked.

I turned toward Elle. "What?"

But I could tell by the measured rise and fall of Elle's chest that she was asleep.

"Love me," the voice pleaded again. A laryngitic rasp, weak with disuse. "Please."

I trembled. She'd never spoken to me before. Or perhaps I just hadn't listened until now.

I stroked her cheek, my fingers running across the damp track of a tear. "Yes," I repeated, "love me."

We didn't speak again that night, for we knew our thoughts were the same. ♀

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Meanwhile, in another part of the island (Long Island, that is), pen-man Peter David pensively strokes his beard. He has just finished a twelve-year run for Marvel Comics writing The Incredible Hulk, *his work on the* Star Trek: The New Frontier *series is going well, and his loopy loup-garou novel* Howling Mad *has just been re-released.* Hmm, *he wonders,* is the world ready for the Archetype? *He taps his pen against the desk.* It might be. It just might be...

The Archetype

By Peter David

HE IS FEELING BORED AND restless. That familiar distant burning that always accompanies extended inactivity begins to gather in His temples.

Then, reflexively, He grips the steering wheel of His cab more tightly as He spots it: A woman, minding her own business, wrestling with a purse snatcher. The thief's grabbed her bag, trying to run, but she refuses to let go, being dragged nearly half a block. Frustrated, the thief pulls out a cobalt blue magnum and aims it squarely between her eyes. There is a flash of incredulity; clearly she doesn't believe it is happening.

The bullet explodes from the gun at the same moment He erupts from the cab twenty feet away. But His mind is already ahead of Him, snaring the bullet barely two inches from her startled face. One of His hyper steps carries Him half the distance, a second covers the remaining span. The purse snatcher barely has time to look into a face that is covered by a familiar black domino mask, eyes glittering with confidence. And then a rock-hard fist, aided by a TK push, takes him down.

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The Masked Man stands over him a moment, pleased that the faint burning is already a distant memory. It is washed away by the applause that sweeps over Him from the crowd that has formed around Him. He waves a moment, then mentally informs the crowd that He has leaped skyward. As they all look up to watch Him depart, two quick hyper steps bring him back to his cab.

His cab has been sitting at a red light. It has all happened so quickly that He is back at the wheel before the light turns green. He drives off, whistling, as everyone else in the vicinity looks to the sky.

"The Archetype is going to kill you."

Mona Malone peered through the clear, triple-ply bulletproof partition that separated her from the rail-thin, rather pallid man with the red hair that hung around his face like a mane. His prison grays provided a sharp contrast to the pale skin and sunken eyes; in some ways he looked like a resident from a concentration camp. One would have thought, upon seeing him for the first time, that he was undernourished and a rather pathetic individual.

This would have been 180 degrees away from the truth. Rex Graves had, once upon a time, held the entire nation in a grip of fear. It had not been his given name to which Americans responded, however. It was his *nom de guerre*, "Aesthete," that drew shudders from individuals up to the highest points of government.

Never had one individual's machinations so simultaneously fascinated and repelled a country. A mild name, defined as someone who seeks out beauty. But Aesthete's definition of beauty was another's concept of terror. He would develop plans both complex and yet simple; schemes that would net him billions of dollars that would vanish somehow into untraceable accounts. And he was deemed uncatchable.

His latest plan had been the best yet. He had hypnotized selected airline pilots — all unknowing, of course — with a posthypnotic command that would force the pilots to send the planes spiraling into a crash. Over two thousand people were killed in four different plane tragedies, while government officials were helpless before Aesthete's demands.

And the Archetype had caught him.

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A weight was lifted off the national consciousness, to be replaced by a massive howling for blood. Currently the Aesthete was on death row as the appeals process ran its course. But the conventional wisdom was that he didn't have a hope in hell. That, indeed, hell was where he belonged.

If the prospect of his imminent demise weighed upon him, Graves gave no sign. Instead he merely regarded Mona with calm certainty, as casually as if they were seated on a park bench discussing baseball scores.

"The Archetype," Mona repeated back to him slowly, "is going to kill me?"

His nod was almost imperceptible. The Aesthete was noted for his economy of movement. In the courtroom during his relatively brief trial, he might have been carved from marble for all the emotion or activity he displayed.

He replied to her in a voice so soft that she couldn't hear him even though she had a phone receiver pressed against her ear. She leaned forward. "I didn't hear that."

"You must listen more closely, then," he said in a voice like a sigh. "I said, 'That is correct.' The Archetype will kill you. Eventually, he'll kill you all."

"And I'm supposed to believe you."

His thin lips smiled wanly. Rather than reply, he extended one bony finger and traced the line of her face against the plexi. "Strong cheek definition," he whispered. "The slight cleft in your chin adds character. The blonde dye job, however, you did yourself. I would use a professional next time if I were you."

"I operate on a reporter's salary, Mr. Graves," replied Mona. "I save money where I can. So I'm supposed to believe you about the Archetype?"

"I heard you the first time," he said. "You are not 'supposed' to do anything beyond what your own abilities will permit you to do. But I have studied him, Mona." She repressed a shudder to hear her own name spoken with such familiarity. He continued, "I am the foremost expert on the Archetype. I've studied those around him, those in his inner circle. I know everything there is to know about him, and I say to you that he will kill you, sooner or later."

"He's a hero," shot back Mona. "He's here to help us all. He's protected the citizens of Steeltown for years..."

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"Yes, for years," he said.

"If that's what you called me here to tell me...if that's the 'big story' that you were so insistent I come hear...then I have to tell you, Mr. Graves, that for someone who fancies himself so knowledgeable, you don't know a damn thing."

His lips drew back slightly. She was dazzled by how white his teeth were.

"He masquerades as Frank Fisher," the Aesthete said with comfortable certainty, "a simple cab driver. He keeps a police band radio in his cab so that he can keep track of what's happening in the city, and attend to emergencies. His generally believed origin is that he is the last survivor of a dying world, but he is actually a genetically created construct from an alternate dimension, designed to be a weapon of war, who fled from his creators into our reality. Am I close, Mona?"

Mona said nothing, merely kept an impassive face. But she could feel a stinging in her cheeks, and she knew beyond certainty that the blood had drained from her face.

"Don't bother to answer, because I'm sure that, out of loyalty, you'll deny it," said Graves. "That's very admirable. I have warned you, Mona. The rest is up to you."

He leaned forward and said, "When you arrive at your city room at the *World Tribune*, you'll find an envelope waiting for you. Don't wonder how it got there; I have methods, even in here. You'll find a video tape...detailed hard copy of my studies. Everything."

And then, most disturbingly of all, he winked at her. He rose, hanging up the phone receiver, and started to turn away. But before he could leave, Mona pounded her hand against the wall to try and get his attention. He turned and stood there, his back still to her.

"Why are you telling me this?" she called to him.

She was speaking over the phone, so it would have seemed that she was wasting her time except that after a moment the Aesthete, still without looking at her, picked up the receiver on his side.

"You asked me why I told you, didn't you," he inquired.

"Yes. Yes, I did."

"Because if I don't tell you, then the Archetype will never know. And when you do die, he will not realize he is the cause and therefore will

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not suffer sufficiently. I believe in suffering, Mona. It's good for the soul."

And then he hung up and walked away, leaving her with the receiver still clutched in her hand.

There is none other like Him in the world.

In the comic books, one would appear and then many more would appear. But that was not a result of likelihood; that was simply good commercial sense. Defying all the odds, one champion would arise. And then another would appear, and another and still another, the odds stretched beyond all credibility, suspension of disbelief tossed aside in favor of pursuing the almighty dollar. If one sold, more would sell, and in the world of comics a plethora of superheros would cause such beings to seem relatively commonplace.

But this is the world of the Archetype. And He is one of a kind.

"WELL, NOW, hey Mona, isn't this a coincidence?"

Frank leaned forward, a broad smile on his face, as Mona stepped into his cab outside the office of the *World Tribune*. "We always seem to be running into each other," he continued. "Should be careful about that. Wouldn't want you to think I'm obsessing about you or anything."

Climbing into the back seat, she looked deeply into his face as he peered through the plexi partition. She tried to see that other face...the one she had committed to memory, every line, every curve, the very texture of it. For the life of her, she couldn't.

He slid the partition aside and looked at her quizzically. "Problem, Mona? You late for an interview or — ?"

"We have to talk, Archetype," she told him.

He blinked, his eyes seeming to mist over. "Me?" he said. "I don't know what you're..."

"*Stop insulting my damn intelligence!*" It all seemed to burst out of her, all the frustration and confusion she'd bottled all this time. "Just stop this shadow dance already! It's been going on for freakin' ever! Every time I call your company to send a cab over, it's always you! There's three hundred cabs in your fleet and it's always you! Whenever I'm on a street

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corner and hail a cab, it's always you! What do you think, I'm *stupid*? I told you, Archetype, we have to talk, and if you offer one word of denial, one cute joke, one simple brushoff, then as God is my witness I'm never going to talk to you again, ever, no matter what outfit you're wearing or whether your face is masked or unmasked. Is that clear?"

The air in the cab seemed to crackle with electricity. And then his face appeared to change right before her eyes. It didn't truly shift in anything more than attitude, but she saw him. And it was all there, right in front of her, that face which had etched itself so thoroughly into her brain. And when he spoke, it was a voice deep in timbre, a voice capable of literally stopping criminals in their tracks.

"Crystal clear," said the voice of the Archetype.

Ten years earlier...*a young college student is assisting with a radiation experiment at Steeltown University when there is a core breach and it goes out of control. The Archetype arrives on the scene, but too late. The boy dies.*

Eight years earlier...*a man consumed with a burning need for vengeance dons a kevlar-lined black raincoat and a slouch hat. He has twin .45s up his sleeve and a determination to bring villains to justice. He confronts his first villains during a smuggling operation on the Steeltown docks. The Archetype arrives, but moments too late. The raincoated man, had he lived, would have called himself the Wrath. But a lucky shot from a dying criminal lodges in his brain. The Wrath dies.*

Six years earlier...*the U.S. government, after thoroughly studying (so they thought) the Archetype, attempts to create a serum that would grant normal humans the Archetype's powers. They inject it into a volunteer. At that moment a fire breaks out elsewhere in the laboratory building. The Archetype shows up to combat it and, while he is there, the volunteer succumbs to seizures and subsequently explodes.*

Not even the Archetype has a perfect record. He is, after all, only metahuman...

In Mona's apartment, Frank had watched the videotape, had looked over Rex Graves's papers, his research. Now he looked up at Mona with Frank's face but the Archetype's little smile of confidence. She had seen

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it so often, whenever he would stand there with his arms smugly akimbo while bullets bounced harmlessly off his manly chest. Not off, actually; stopping inches short and clattering to the floor.

"It's nonsense, Mona," he said calmly. "Certainly you must see that."

He spoke in that utterly unflappable tone he oftentimes used, the one that would always stop her heart from racing during her most recent brush with death. Something within her wanted to give in to it, to see with the same simple clarity that he possessed. But she shook it off, like someone just awakening would toss away a dream. Still, she couldn't quite look him in the eyes. "He...puts forward a fairly...convincing argument, though, doesn't he."

"And Hitler was fairly convincing, so I'm told," Frank replied. He picked up some of Graves's research papers and scanned them once more. "He's thorough, I'll give him that. But his conclusions are preposterous..."

Mona's back was to him, her arms across her shoulders as if she were cold. "Frank," she said softly, "do you remember how we met?"

"How could I forget?" he said. "I saved your life. Those truck hijackers would have run you right over."

"Yes. I know. I would have died." She still couldn't turn to face him. "And since then, time after time, my life's been at stake, and you...the Archetype...have always been there to save me. Always. People call me the Archetype's girl friend. They say I'm accident prone, because you're always bailing me out." And then she took a deep breath and managed to look straight at him. "Frank...how in God's name did I ever live as long as I did?"

He tapped the research papers with a look of incredulity on his face. "You're not buying into this...?"

"Frank, *think* about it! I was never in a life and death situation before I met you! *Never!* Sure, I had a close scrape here and there. A bad auto accident once, or a nasty fall that left me with a barely noticeable limp. It was all things I could handle, though. Normal stuff. But the stuff that's happened to me since I met you...the only one who *could* save me was you. The Archetype, saving the day. The Archetype, to the rescue. The Archetype, proving his worth and making himself indispensable."

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"What are you saying, that I should have let you die?"

"Frank, what if Graves is *right*?"

He stared at her in clear disbelief. "You mean that I was responsible for it all? That I was the cause? Mona, that's insane! As insane as the Aesthete himself!"

"But it's not just me, Frank! It's the other people at the *Trib!* Kevin and Chris and Bobbi...they all keep finding themselves in danger when they never did before! For that matter, why is there still *any* crime in Steeltown? With you cruising around, why would any crook *dare*? My God, Frank, didn't it strike you as just a little bit odd that a guy inside a giant robot tried to knock over the bank last week? *Any* other city, he would have gotten away with it! But he picked the one you were in!"

"He's just like all the others," said Frank, except at this point there was nothing in his voice that was like Frank. It was the deep timbre of the Archetype that filled the apartment like the rumble of a passing subway. "He was trying to make a name for himself."

"But it's ridiculous! Crooks don't want to make names for themselves! They want to steal! Period!"

He rose, seeming to grow a foot taller as he did so. "You're really saying that you think I'm the cause of it. That somehow I," and he picked up the sheaf of papers in a hand that could crush diamonds. "That I..." and he began to read off the report. "'The Archetype psionically manipulates probabilities in order to perpetuate the illusion that the Archetype is needed. Indeed, his self-absorption and need to be the center of attention is so massive that he subconsciously has prevented the creation of any beings similar to himself for fear of sharing the limelight. His desperate craving to show how much he is needed...'" He tossed the papers down disdainfully. "I *am* needed! I'm the Archetype! You'd be dead without me! The city would be in ruins without me, ravaged by all manner of villains! It — "

"*We were doing fine before you got here!*" she practically howled. "Don't you *get* that? None of this stuff *ever* happened before you arrived on the scene! But as soon as you showed up, it was like the whole city turned into your own...your own playground! A place for you to strut your stuff! Hardly a week goes by where my life isn't at stake! And how often have you found yourself at the scene of a crime, just purely by

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happenstance? Sure, you've got the police band radio in your cab, but I bet half the time you don't even need it because you just happen to stumble over someone being victimized!"

He thought of that morning...of the man with the gun...

He thought of a hundred, a thousand mornings like that...

He thought of the pain in his head, the need within him that was almost palpable, just before the crime had occurred...

There was just the slightest hint of desperation in his voice. "He's wrong..."

"Probably! Probably he's wrong! Probably he's full of crap! But Archetype, my God, what if he's right? What if he's *right*?"

And now it was the Archetype's turn to present his back to her. Something within him seemed to wilt ever so slightly. And when the Archetype spoke, it was with something that was a great oddity: It was with a soft voice.

"What would you have me do?" he asked.

"Leave," she said. When he turned back to her, astonishment clear on his face, she clarified, "Only for a month. Just to see."

"A *month*?"

"Just to see."

"You'll be dead in a month."

Even though his tone was flat, it was the single harshest thing she'd ever heard him say. For a moment she felt as if she were standing up to a force of nature. "I can take care of myself," she told him.

They stared at each other for a long moment.

"I love you," he said.

They were the words she had waited so long to hear.

She made no reply. Although her chin trembled slightly, which might have been reply enough.

He did not repeat the words. Instead he nodded almost imperceptibly. Then he turned with a quick motion and was gone, like a shadow disappearing when struck by a spotlight. The window was open and the only thing to mark his passing was the slight fluttering of the drapes. She went to the window, slowly closed it, then slid to the floor and began to sob.

* * *

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"Be careful," said the Aesthete. "He'll come back today."

It was his last day, his last hours alive. And Mona was the last person he was going to see, aside from his executioners.

She stared at him through the plexi, trying not to react to the fact that Graves's head had been shaved to ensure close contact with the electrodes from the electric chair. "What do you mean?"

"Do you think I can't read, Mona?" he asked politely. "For the past three weeks, it's been fairly slow news for your poor paper. Crime has dropped off. No threats to your life. Peaceful. Almost idyllic in Steeltown as of late. Not perfect, certainly, but not a magnet for extraordinary difficulties." But then his voice lowered. "He'll be nearby today, though. He's going to expect trouble."

"Why?"

"Why? Because I am to die, Mona," said the Aesthete with what sounded like faint disappointment...even disapproval that she had to ask. "Executed by the state. Your tax dollars at work. And the Archetype will be convinced that I have some insidious plan at work, some last great gesture. Or perhaps even a means of escaping my imminent electrocution. I suspect he has sworn to keep his distance for...two months? No...no, a month, more likely. But he will want to be here for my execution. He'll want to be sure I'm dead. He'll feel that he is needed to make sure I don't 'pull a fast one.'"

"And *do* you have a plan for escape?" she asked.

He smiled with his thin lips. "I don't require one. I'm going to get away because he needs me to get away. The greater my accomplishments, the greater his. That's how this works. I'm surprised you haven't figured that out yet."

For a moment no more words passed between them, and then Rex Graves rose from his chair. Mona remained seated.

"Food for thought," said the Aesthete. "When someone is told that his services are not required...an obsessive personality will sometimes do whatever is necessary to prove the opposite."

"Meaning...?"

"Meaning that if the Archetype goes to extremes..." and the smile remained on his face, although there was no amusement behind it, "...then my death...or yours...will be the least of the world's problems. Good-bye, Mona." And he walked away.

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* * *

They threw the switch to electrocute the Aesthete at twelve midnight precisely. Mona Malone, seated in the observation deck with other reporters and relatives of Graves's victims, felt her breath catch as the switch slammed home.

The Aesthete appeared unperturbed. It was the last sight she saw just before the lights went out.

Never in the history of the prison had there been any sort of blackout at such a crucial moment.

The emergency generators tried to kick in...

...and exploded.

The massive fireball leaped onto the prison like a thing alive.

The next moments were completely confused to Mona. She made it out into a corridor, tried to run, stumbled, felt pounding feet all around her. Someone hit her in the side of the head and she went down. She heard a roar of another explosion, the crackling of fire, smoke wafting through the air, screaming everywhere...

A wall of fire leaped into existence around her. She tried to haul herself up, but she felt helpless, helpless as an infant. She inhaled smoke and felt a heaviness in her chest...

And then a figure dressed in black and gold came through the fire, seeming to jump from one point to the next, and Mona was raised up in powerful arms that, indeed, perpetuated her feeling of helplessness.

Then she was airborne...

...and cursing the name of her rescuer...

SHE LAY THERE in the hospital bed, the Archetype standing a few feet away, his arms folded across his powerful chest. The hallway outside was crammed with newspeople.

"It was a near thing," he told her. "Your lungs nearly collapsed. If I hadn't..."

She stared at him.

"Mona...if I hadn't been there..."

Still nothing.

He drew himself up, started again. "The Aesthete got away, unfortunately. I should have suspected that. Don't you see, Mona," and his voice

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started to take on a tinge of desperation. "I was gone for three weeks...I would have stayed away longer. But then I realized we were playing right into the Aesthete's plan. He wanted me away, wanted me gone. That way I wouldn't be around to try and stop his escape attempt. I realized at the last second and came back, but the moment I did, that's when the lights went out, when the generator blew. It's my fault. If I'd gotten here sooner, I could have headed it off. But I'll catch him again. Don't you see how much I'm needed, Mona? Don't you..."

And she began to scream. She pitched violently in the bed, yanked tubes out of herself, grabbed a plastic pitcher off the table next to her and hurled it at him. A simple TK touch stopped it short.

And then the words began, words such as he'd never heard from her mouth. From anyone's. Every hurtful thing she could think of, every bit of bile, of undiluted fury, blasted out of her. Every danger she'd ever faced, every occasion where she'd feared for her life, every time she'd been afraid for the life of a loved one, and every time she'd counted on him...on *him*...to save her. Every bit of love she'd ever felt, every scrap of idolization, every hidden fantasy, all blasted and blackened and turned to poison. Like a berserk snake she sank her fangs into him, pumping the venom, all her trust transmuted to hatred.

No longer was she the handpuppet of fate. No longer did she think of herself as the helpless wood chip floating in the stream of bizarre fortunes. No longer did she blame herself for situations that she had unknowingly gotten herself into. No longer did she feel that her life didn't make sense.

It all made terrible, terrible sense, and everything that was wrong with it was because of this...this creature. This abomination. This monstrosity which so desperately needed to be loved that it restructured reality in order to accommodate it.

She screamed and screamed and screamed and when she felt as if she were running out of breath, new anger bubbled within her and the invective would continue, as if she could wipe him from existence with the power of her fury alone.

She had no idea how long she went on. She lost the sense of it, lost awareness of her reality, and when things snapped back into focus for her, she was looking up into the face of Bobbi, her editor, who was clearly filled with tremendous concern over this berserker, howling harridan that

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Mona had become. Reporters were crowding in at the door, snapping pictures, scribbling notes furiously, trying to pick out what she was saying even though her words had dissolved into incoherence.

They wound up sedating her, and as soon as the sedation wore off she started screaming again. This kept up for two days. It took that long to dawnon her that the Archetype was gone.

The Inuit boy has no idea what possessed him to wander away from his parents. No clue why he feels the need to tromp across the whiteness of the frozen tundra beneath him.

All he knows is that a mountain of white has reared up from ahead of him, its white fur having helped it to blend in perfectly with its surroundings.

The polar bear comes at the boy and he backpedals, screaming, but none can possibly hear him because — for whatever reason — he's ignored his father's rules for the first time in his young life and gone off fishing on his own. His first mistake and, very likely, his last.

He doesn't even see the blurred figure of black and gold. All the boy knows is that suddenly the bear is on its back some twenty feet away, roaring in confusion. Having had enough, the bear flips over and scrambles away, the thudding of its paws practically causing the ground to tremble.

His savior turns to face him. The man in the domino mask smiles.

The boy reaches out a hand to Him.

He is needed. And He is happy.

And meantime, high above Him, for no apparent reason, a new hole in the ozone layer begins to widen quickly...

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This issue we're delighted to bring you two promising debut stories. In addition to Paolo Bacigalupi's first sale, we also have here Yoon Ha Lee's first short fiction sale. Ms. Lee is currently an undergraduate at Cornell University and says she spends "entirely too much time reading books about science and warfare, and consequently know just enough about related subjects to get myself in serious trouble." We hope and expect to see her making more trouble in the future with provocative stories like this one.

The Hundredth Question

By Yoon Ha Lee

Prologue

THIS IS A TEST.

YOU WILL BE SCORED OUT OF 100 POSSIBLE POINTS. RESPONSES WILL BE TIMED. GUESSES MAY OR MAY NOT BE PENALIZED; THE CONSEQUENCES ARE UP TO YOU.

PROCEED.

1

YOU DIDN'T WANT TO BE here, not really, not ever, but *want* is a one-way word these days. The government says jump, you ask what delta-vee. So here you are, wherever *here* is in the continuum of worlds, every reflex tuned to snapping. Fresh out of training, you have yet to trade scars with one of the aliens' battleships; no one's yet engaged one face to face and lived to brag about it, if they have faces.

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From the inside, the carrier *Pavane* is a labyrinth of dull silver tubes like eyeless mirrors, the surfaces smooth but unreflecting. Or perhaps the corridors are mirrors after all, and you are the only one here, huddled in the womb of your little fighter, the lone human in the heart of a kaleidoscope.

But you remember the long hours of practice and battlesim, one-on-one duels while computers and instructors calmly evaluated your performance. There are ninety-nine other sweating soldiers in their own fighters. Swarm Brown, for new recruits. Surviving lancers will progress through a spectrum to Swarm Gold, and eventually retirement. The war will be over by the time you get that far, or so they tell you.

The fighter thrums: sixty seconds before launch.

The womb's air is acrid with the stink of your fear, but life-support swiftly increases its processing rate to compensate.

Moments tick by, measured in eye blinks, and you close your eyes, letting the interface take over. There are no viewports. Biological sight becomes a hindrance, or so you've found.

And then the *Pavane* spits out Swarm Brown's hundred fighters, spits out a hundred swarms and sends them hurtling through the radiation-splattered darkness against the bright, jabbing patterns of the alien battleships. You evade as soon as you have maneuvering space, twisting away from the rest of your swarm to find that an alien follows you to the battle's periphery.

The aliens never fight in clusters. Otherwise, the carrier would fry a hundred in a burst. Always they harry and scatter, pebbles battering at a boulder, or dance one-on-one. Duels they accept as their due, never summoning their comrades to help even when their ships falter. Years of experience have taught humanity to fight on the aliens' terms or not at all, one instructor told you. Something about that nags you, but then you must dodge the spindrift fire that targets your fighter.

Not a duel, but a duet. The battlesims were nothing like this. After a while — a heartbeat? an hour? — you almost forget that this is war. Then one of your lances strikes the alien's engines, and it blossoms into destruction, one of many graveyard flowers. How could you have forgotten?

Orders come through the interface, and the tatterdemalion remnants

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of Swarm Brown reassemble for pickup. You have escaped.

For the first time in your life, you want to sing.

5

A few battles later, you are still alive, but the song within you has twisted into darker threads. You have a few hours' leave at this spaceport before you are hurled across the stars once more; the port's name eludes you. Walking among the crowds, surrounded by colors both glaring and pastel, sheer human proximity reassures you. No womb separates you from faces, voices, the brush of shoulder against shoulder.

Instead, you wonder that they can't see the scars that pattern the wrong side of your skin, the alien blood gloving your hands, more tangible than a lover's smile. Civilians, soldiers. It's a one-way wall that separates the two.

You were right the first time, for the wrong reasons.

Biological sight is useless to a soldier.

21

Swarm Cobalt. You have been shuffled from swarm to swarm, carrier to carrier, enough times that the colors smear together into gray. Somewhere on your service record is the long list, your personal spectrum; on your dress uniform, too, if you ever have a chance to wear it. You would be lost amid the blur of faces at any formal function, and there was a time when the thought would have disturbed you.

You listen to your bunkmates:

"Heard the aliens blew up Cassandra City." The woman's voice is low, too low, ready to break. "My brothers."

Cassandra: you try to remember what you heard through the garble of the news databursts. Cassandra the Jeweled City, on Eostre V. It could have been your own home. The aliens will not retreat, will not leave humanity in peace, will not agree to draw spheres of influence. So they say.

"...and you?"

You decline to join the conversation. They understand. You've seen veterans who speak in nothing but profanities cobbled together from a

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dozen-plus languages, or laugh no matter what the occasion. The government doesn't care, as long as they continue to sow death among the alien ships.

"I miss the gardens. My cat — you have cats on your planet, don't you?"

"Not my colony, no. Spiderbirds, yes. Ever had one weave a web all over your room? I can't believe I miss cleaning up after the fragging creature."

"Ah. One of those."

Ah. Of course. You never had a pet, and there are none on the *Pavane*.

48

Planet after planet, colony after colony, asteroid mining fields and traffic nodes, battlefields where dust shrouds every movement and others where the stars' radiance drowns your fighter's lances and the silent explosions. After a while they stop telling you who you're defending this time. It doesn't matter, you suppose. All for the cause.

The aliens have gotten better, it seems. Or perhaps it's because Swarm Viridian is sent against the aliens' own experienced fighters. Here you are again, dodging and diving, balancing thrust against gravity webs, hardly aware that the universe contains anything other than you and your opponent.

There was a time, you remember dimly, when you came out of a battle wishing life support were more efficient, to free the womb from your sweat. But you know that, if you emerge from this skirmish, your hands will be dry, like your eyes. How many more battles before you reach Swarm Gold? *Is* there a Swarm Gold, or is it a legend? Does anyone get that far, or are their hands as empty as yours?

Your concentration flickers, and suddenly heat roars through your skin, your bones, the branching of your veins. Sensor-blind, eye-blind, you stab through the interface, guessing at the alien's evasive maneuvers, a helix skewed in ever-sharpening angles. Whether you hit it or not, you don't know, but no second blast follows.

You wait. Surely the *Pavane* will pick you up, though you can't reach pickup. Surely.

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55

You shouldn't have agreed to come to the ceremony, but you had no choice, really. The public needs its heroes, has always needed heroes: King Arthur, Rama, Kit Carson, Maui.... You smile back at the people around you, feeling your face stretch in an unfamiliar way, and not just because of your long-healed burns. The medal pinned to your uniform is lost in the glitter of fashions around you — no. It stands out.

"So how's it like being hailed as another veteran?" asks the soldier next to you, a wry glint in his eye.

You shrug, mumble a noncommittal response. You're not a veteran till you reach Swarm Gold, and retire.

"They'll forget you," a harsh voice mutters in your ear. You whirl around, then relax. Basic training takes longer to forget than you had thought. "Glory for a day, and then you're gone. They use up their heroes faster than a dreamer uses up drugs." The voice's owner, disfigured and hunched over, pats your arm, then quickly vanishes.

Veteran. The word tastes like ashes.

98

Now that you've reached Swarm Carnelian, you're no longer a mere lancer. The basic training you received once upon a lifetime has a purpose after all. This time your swarm is to invade one of the aliens' outposts; humanity is no longer on the defensive. Whether you will see one of the elusive aliens, you don't know. No one does.

The kaleidoscope spins around you for a moment as your fighter is moved into place. Once you tried to figure out if you were assigned to the same position each time, but after a while you gave up trying to keep track. All you can tell is that there are fewer ships in each swarm as you ascend the hierarchy.

The interface shows you a splotch, then a cylinder, then the outpost's intricate structures and substructures. Your senses tell you something is wrong, and then you laugh to yourself: there are no dancing patterns, no alien battleships. They have been taken by surprise. You hurtle along the cables and corridors, peripherally aware of your comrades nearby, and at

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last you come to the heart of the outpost. What it holds, what purpose it has, you can't say.

Reluctantly, you leave your womb, flare pistol cradled in your fingers. It takes you a moment to adjust to eyesight rather than the interface's sensors, and you curse yourself: you should have disconnected while you were protected in your fighter. Fortunately, nothing hits you. This time.

Then your swarm's leader nods, and twenty-five flares pinpoint the vault's entrance. The circuitry sizzles — and then, impossibly, the entrance explodes outward; you are flung backward, one of your comrades' bodies shielding you, and you gag at the fluid that leaks over your armorsuit. Blood, you think. Your side aches more than bruises can explain.

Shoving the corpse away, you rise, readjusting your grip on the pistol. The inside of your gauntlet has suddenly turned slick, or is it your palm? Eight other members of your swarm have begun to pick themselves up. There is nothing of dance or duet in this, only blood and the stink of ruptured flesh. No one warned you it would be like this; instead of the bright graveyard flowers, there are only fallen shapes as unmoving as stone.

Then you turn around and see the aliens.

99

You freeze.

They lied to you.

They spun lies around you like a spiderbird weaving its web in a sunlit room, or a kaleidoscope of silver tubes.

The aliens aren't aliens after all, but humans. People who fought for their home, whose faces you never saw.

Your leader is dead, but theirs is not: a one-armed woman who stands tall despite the tears tracking across her begrimed face. The weapon she holds is unfamiliar to you, but it doesn't matter. She points it downward, not at you or your surviving comrades. One by one, she fires at the corpses, hers and yours, leaving black streaks across the floor: not a burial, not a graveyard, but it's all she has.

You outnumber her, you and your comrades.

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The tableau holds for a moment. You remember your orders, and you remember the lies. Slowly, you lift your pistol, but do not fire.

Surprisingly, the woman sighs. And then she salutes you.

Salutes you.

100

If you had just killed 99 people and the 100th asked for mercy, what would you do?

Epilogue

GUESSES MAY OR MAY NOT BE PENALIZED.
THE CONSEQUENCES ARE UP TO YOU.

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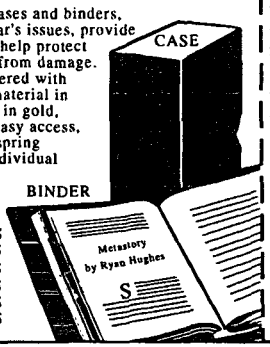

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SCIENCE

PAT MURPHY & PAUL DOHERTY

TWISTED THINKING

A MÖBIUS strip is a band of paper that's deceptively simple in its appearance and exceptionally twisted in its properties.

You can make a Möbius strip easily. Just take an ordinary strip of paper, one that's about eleven inches long and an inch wide. Bring the ends of the strip together to make a loop and put a half twist in the loop, so that the top surface of the strip meets the bottom surface of the strip. Tape the ends together.

Voilà! You have a Möbius strip — a devilishly twisted device that can tangle your mind and lead you to peculiar places. Way back in 1858, mathematician August Ferdinand Möbius discovered the peculiar properties of this paper loop. Ever since, topologists (a particularly twisted breed of mathematician) have been experimenting and speculating about the properties of this strip and its relatives.

In this column, we'll explore some of the peculiar properties of the Möbius strip, show you some mighty strange new experiments you can do at home, and take a brief excursion into fourth-dimensional thinking. To come along on this adventure, you'll need some paper, tape, a pencil or pen, a pair of scissors, and a paper clip.

FROM SIMPLE BEGINNINGS

Start by making a Möbius strip, as described above. To prove to yourself that this piece of paper now has only one side, start at any point on the strip and draw a line, following the length of the strip. Without picking up the point of the pencil, you'll go around the loop twice and end up back where you started. The line will go all around the inside of the loop and all around the outside

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of the loop — even though you never picked up the pencil to change sides. That's because the Möbius strip only has one side.

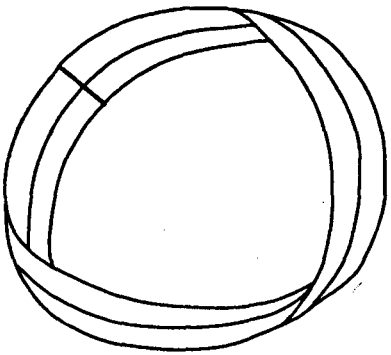

Diagram 1/Möbius strip

Any time you want to test a paper loop to determine whether it's a Möbius strip or not, draw a line. Try this with loops with more than a half twist, and you'll find that any loop with an odd number of half twists has one side like a Möbius strip and any loop with an even number of half twists has two sides. Counting, as Paul likes to point out, isn't as easy as your first grade teacher led you to believe. It's difficult to count the number of sides to a piece of paper even though the number is either 1 or 2.

Incidentally, the Möbius strip also has only one edge. (An untwisted loop has two.) You can prove that to yourself by putting your finger on the edge anywhere along the Möbius strip. Now run your finger along the edge. Eventually, you end up right back where you started, having gone all the way around the loop twice.

SIMPLE DISSECTIONS

Now think about this: What will you get if you cut your Möbius strip in half, dividing it down the middle all along its length?

Try it. Maybe you figured you'd get two Möbius strips, but that's not what happens. You get one long, twisted strip. Check to see if it's a Möbius strip by drawing a line, and you'll discover it's not. The new strip has two half twists, so it's not a Möbius strip.

It's this result that prompted some anonymous poet to write the following limerick:

A mathematician confided
That a Möbius band is one-sided,
And you'll get quite a laugh,
If you cut one in half,
For it stays in one piece when divided.

To twist your mind a little farther, try to predict what you'll get if you cut this new strip down the middle all along its length. Then do the experiment. This time you get

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two interlocking rings, each of which has four half twists.

Weird, huh? But we're not done yet. Make another Möbius strip and try this — rather than cutting the strip in half, start your cut one third of the strip's width in from the edge, as if you were going to cut a skinny ring off the wide ring. (Of course, you've realized by now that there's no way you're going to do anything that simple.) When you're done, you'll find you have something entirely new: a long loop with two half twists interlocking with a Möbius strip the length of the original. What you've done is cut around the loop twice, cutting near the edge. And since a Möbius strip only has one edge, you have to go around twice to cut that edge off. Basically, you've cut off a strip near the edge, leaving a skinnier version of the original Möbius strip intact.

By the way, there is nothing special about a third. You get the same result if you cut anywhere except the middle of the strip. When you cut the middle of the strip, you meet up with your original cut on your first time around the strip. With any other fraction, you cut off the edge of the strip.

We recommend that you try these dissection techniques on paper loops that have various numbers of twists in them. Paul suggests that you use the scientific method — predict what will happen, then test your hypothesis by trying the experiment. Pat prefers simply to whack away with scissors and be amazed by the results. She warns that attempting to predict the results may make your head explode, particularly when you cut a loop with three half twists in it. (Definitely try that one. The results will amaze you.)

Choose whichever approach suits you best. If you choose to adopt the scientific method, that's fine — this is, after all, a magazine of fantasy and SCIENCE fiction. But some of the properties of a Möbius strip seem more like magic than math, so if you'd rather emphasize that this is a magazine of FANTASY and science fiction, that's all right too.

COUNTING THE TWISTS

While you are doing all this, you may need to count the number of twists in a band before or after you cut it. When you have multiple twists, this isn't always easy. Here's how we do it. Hold the band so that one surface is flat against a table top and all the twists are on top. Clip a paper clip to the band at a point near

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you. Run the paper clip along the Möbius band counting its revolutions.

If there's just one half twist in the loop and you start out with the head of the paper clip (the part you'd pull on to unclip it) facing to the right, it will end up facing to the left, having gone through half a revolution. To bring it back to its original position, you need to push it around the loop twice.

DOUBLE THE WEIRDNESS; DOUBLE THE FUN

All of that's kind of weird, but we're just getting started. Make two identical strips of paper and label the ends with letters as shown in the picture. Lay one strip on top of the other with end A on top of end C.

Take this double strip and bring the ends together to make a loop. Suppose you taped the ends of the strips together, attaching the A to B and C to D. You'd get two nested loops, right. Simple.

Don't tape them yet. Instead, put a half twist in the loop and bring A to D and B to C. Now tape the ends together so that you have a double layer Möbius strip. Test this double loop and make sure it's a Möbius strip. Put your pen at junction A/D and draw a line that runs the length of the strip. You'll come around to junction C/B. Keep going

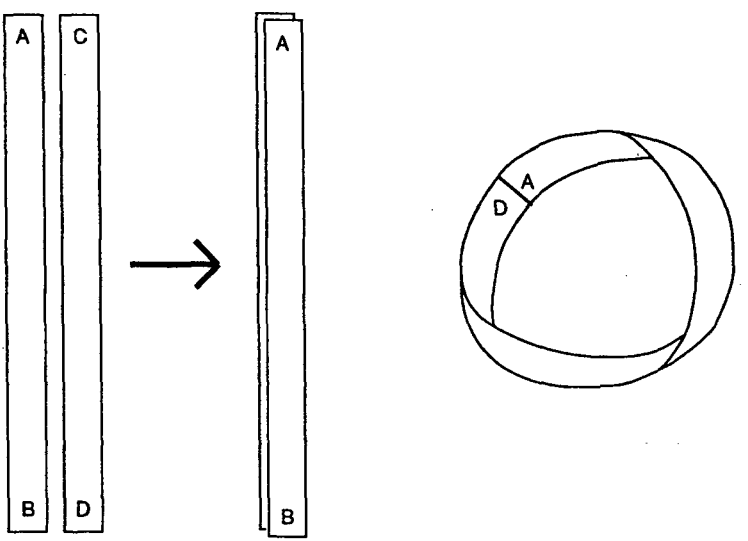

Diagram 2/Double Möbius strip

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and you'll end up back at A/D. Sure enough, you've gone all the way around the inside and outside of the loop. A one-sided strip, sure enough. The space between these two pieces of paper is pretty clearly a Möbius strip-shaped space. You can do a little experimenting with this space using your paper clip. Hold onto one end of the paper clip and stick the clip between the two strips. Now run the paper clip all the way around the loop, following the space between the strips. You can manage this easily enough. The paper clip has just followed a Möbius strip, encountering no obstacles along the way. It seems obvious that you must have two Möbius strips here.

Here comes the surprise. (You know there had to be one.) Try to separate the two Möbius strips. Surprise! It isn't two Möbius strips at all. It's one big loop with two full twists. Once you un-nest the strips, it isn't a Möbius strip at all.

How strange. It appeared that you had a Möbius strip. Now you don't. Paul thinks of the doubly twisted loop that you get when you un-nest the strips as the paint on a Möbius strip! That is exactly what it is. This doubly twisted loop formed the surface around a Möbius space. And, interestingly enough, the surface around a Möbius strip has two sides: the side that's up against the strip and the other side, the outside. We know this because the line that we drew on the single side of the Möbius strip is still on the doubly twisted Möbius paint strip. That line is on one side of the strip, all the way around it.

With an effort, you can make that big loop back into the nested Möbius loop. Give it a try. When you're attempting this, it helps to pay attention to the line you drew on the original, nested, Möbius strip. That line will end up on the outside of the strip when you re-nest it.

By the way, the mathematician's Möbius strip (like the mathematician's plane) has no thickness. Some people have trouble remembering this when they deal with Möbius strips made of paper, but they can visualize the Möbius strip made of the empty space between the two bands getting thinner and thinner without limit.

TRIPLE THE WEIRDNESS...

Intrigued by all this, we took our experiment one step farther (This is, of course, in keeping with one of Pat's Rules for Living, "Anything worth doing is worth overdoing.") So we took three strips of

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paper, labeled the ends as shown, and stacked them with strip A/B on top of C/D on top of E/F. Then we made them into a loop with a half twist, and taped A to F and B to E and C to D. What do you think we got when we un-nested the strips?

Oh, come on — don't give up now. Before, we had the paint on a Möbius strip. Now we've filled in the Möbius space with a Möbius strip, so we have the paint on the Möbius strip — and a Möbius strip itself, linked to the paint. Try it yourself and see.

The true experimentalists among you have probably already leapt ahead to a few more experiments with this peculiar artifact. Suppose you make a double nested Möbius strip as described in B. Then you cut it down the middle as described in A. What would you get? Suppose you cut it 1/3 of the way in? What then? Makes your head hurt, doesn't it? Have a good time!

IMPLICATIONS OF TWISTED THINKING

By now, the floor around you is probably littered with twisted paper rings and you're wondering what all this has to do with science fiction. Well, the field is rich with stories that take the Möbius strip one step farther.

In "A Subway called Möbius," A.J. Deutsch postulates a Boston subway system that becomes more and more complicated until trains find their way into the fourth dimension. Martin Gardner's "No-Sided Professor" is about a mathematician who invents a folding that goes one step beyond Möbius and creates a no-sided object. (Paul likes this one particularly well because it illustrates his rule about mathematics challenges. He says that when someone challenges you to find how few steps you can use to accomplish some puzzle task — like weighing coins, cutting gold chains, transporting goats, lions, and cabbage across rivers in rowboats, the answer is always at least one less than whatever answer you can find. So as soon as Möbius discovered the one-sided strip, Paul figures the search was on for the no-sided strip.)

Science fiction writers are always looking for a way into the fourth dimension; it's part of our job description. And the Möbius strip offers some interesting possibilities to those who want to think about other dimensions.

The Möbius strip has only one

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side, right? You've proven that by drawing a pencil line all the way around the strip, inside (so to speak) and outside (so to speak), without ever lifting your pencil to go over an edge.

Now suppose you take a hole punch and make a hole through the strip. You might think that hole goes from one side of the strip to the other — but the strip only has one side. So where does the hole go from and to?

It goes from one location on the one-sided strip to another location on the one-sided strip. If you were a two-dimensional Flatlander, this hole could provide a startling shortcut to a distant location (a spot that the Flatlander would ordinarily have to trudge a long way to reach). That shortcut goes through the third dimension, something that a Flatlander living on the strip might have a tough time visualizing.

So if you can give a two-dimensional creature a shortcut through the third dimension, then surely we can find a way to provide three-dimensional creatures with a shortcut through the fourth dimension. For that, science fiction writers consult the theoretical physicists, who are often kindred spirits.

WORMHOLES AND EXOTIC MATTER

For this, we consulted an excellent book by Kip Thorne: *Black Holes and Time Warps — Einstein's Outrageous Legacy*. In the final chapter, Thorne describes his efforts to assist Carl Sagan in coming up with a plausible solution for Sagan's novel, *Contact*. Sagan needed a method by which a character could travel for an hour or so and make her way from near Earth to a position near the star Vega, some twenty-six light years away. To assist Sagan, Thorne explored the science fictional possibilities of the wormhole, a hypothetical shortcut for travel between distant points in the Universe. Like the hole in the Möbius strip, a wormhole connects two points by taking a shortcut through another dimension.

According to Thorne, wormholes were discovered mathematically way back in 1916, as a solution to Einstein's field equation. But those mathematical wormholes aren't much use for interstellar travel: they appear, connect two points, then pinch off and disappear very very quickly. Thorne writes of such a wormhole, "...its total lifespan from creation to pinchoff is so short that nothing whatsoever (no person, no

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radiation, no signal of any sort) can travel through it, from one mouth to another. Anything that tries will get caught and destroyed in the pinchoff."

Thorne postulates something called "exotic matter" that holds the wormhole open by pushing its walls apart gravitationally. He discusses the properties of exotic matter at length and indicates that such stuff does indeed theoretically exist: Stephen Hawking's discoveries related to black holes suggest that such matter may exist near a black hole's event horizon. Thorne suggests that, given what physicists know now, wormholes could theoretically be created by an infinitely advanced civilization and held open with exotic matter. He goes on to talk at length about the possible uses of those wormholes.

In the end, it makes the two of us think about that hole through the Möbius strip. A Flatlander mathematician or theoretical physicist might theorize that such a thing was possible, and be accused of indulging in science fiction. From the point of view of the Flatlander, that hole was punched by some unimaginable entity existing in another dimension. From our point of view as three-dimensional creatures, wormholes are similar.

A FEW MORE PAPER DOLLS

That concludes our excursion into the highly theoretical and intriguing world of theoretical physics. Pat will be continuing her exploration by assisting her friend Max Merriwell in the creation of a space opera. (For more on that, visit Pat's web site at www.exo.net/jaxxx/)

But for those of us who prefer to remain on this planet, here's one more mind-tangling experiment involving paper and scissors and tape. First, cut out a large plus sign, like this:

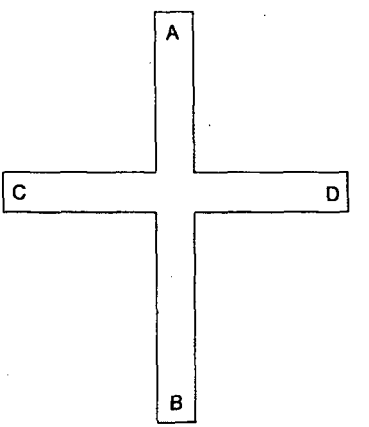

Diagram 3/Plus sign

Tape A to B to make a loop, then tape C to D to make a loop. Now look at this construction carefully and figure out what will happen if

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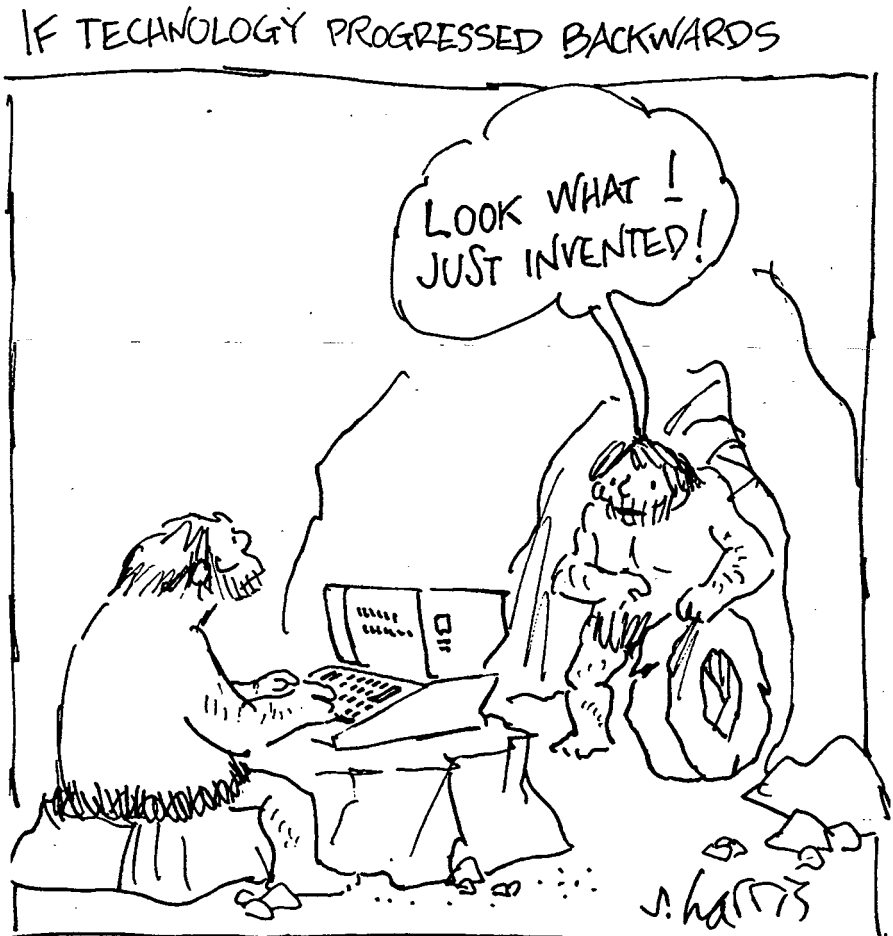
you cut either of these loops in half, dividing it down the middle all along its length. When you think you've got it, try the experiment and see if you were right.

After you've done that, predict what will happen if you bisect the other loop in the same way. Then try the experiment.

Finally, think about what will happen if you put a half twist in one or both of the loops — and then bisect them. If you manage to predict the result correctly, congratulations on your geometric imagination!



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Gordon Eklund is the author of such novels as All Times Possible, Dance of the Apocalypse, Inheritors of Earth, *and more recently,* A Thunder on Neptune. *He won a Nebula Award for his collaboration with Gregory Benford, "If the Stars Are Gods." Longtime readers might recall his 1978 story for us, "Points of Contact." This new novelette is an edgy, daring, and unsettling foray into regions where most of us dare not tread.*

The Cross Road Blues

By Gordon Eklund

I went to the crossroad
fell down on my knees
I went to the crossroad
fell down on my knees
Asked the Lord above "Have mercy
save poor Bob, if you please."

— Robert Johnson

What rough beast, its hour come round at last
Slouches towards...?
(And so on.)

— W. B. Yeats

Chapter Zero — Who Do You Love? (11/1)

The short, hard-boiled, shaven-headed young woman comes energetically hopping in through the front door like a cat out of the rain and the first thought Leary's thinking is how it's been seven, eight months since

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the last time he's had any other human being inside this here personal domicile. (In reality: a raw sewage dump of a communed roomapt in a nasty corner of the Little Hell Projects.) And with various of his soiled personal possessions, records and socks mostly, chaotically strewn about the bare dirt floor, half empty bottle of mescal (with Leary, mescal bottles are always half empty, never half full) resting forlornly atop the clanking radiator like a mourner at a funeral. Well shit in the sink, thinks Leary, struggling to sit and taking a squint at his caller, so here he lies a drunken spent dick of a lowzone ex-cop and here waltzes in some kind of skin pale-as-death, big wet doe brown eyes, grab-your-balls and squeeze-for-sweet-Jesus class act of a bebopping girl-child's face and body in a red vinyl leather vest, boots, and bursting blue velvet pantaloons.

So what gives?

Then he recognizes her. (And freezes up inside: *ohjesuschrist–notagainoh please not* fucking *again*.)

She purrs: "Hi, I'm Sunny," plopping her fetchingly boyish little butt unceremoniously down beside him, knees crossed seductively, boot tops clinging to bare calf skin. "What's that music you're playing? I think I know it."

"Robert Johnson," he lies. "Now get out of here. I'm retired."

She smirks, showing far too much gum. "Forcibly retired."

"So?"

"So who cares? Get up off the floor. Sit straight. You look like a dead turd down there."

He stands, swaying over her, scowling like a goose, wagging a bony finger. "Get the fuck out of my — "

"Your home?" She laughs, spraying glee like a lizard. "Leary, you crazy shit. You've got to be — "

He bellows: "It's still my home!"

She lets her big brown eyes flutter. "And that's not Robert Johnson either. He never played electric guitar. And he died in 1938 — '39. A jealous girlfriend poisoned him."

"That's one version," says Leary.

"There's another?" she asks, eyes wide with interest.

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Chapter Zero and One-half — Sweet Little Angel (11/1)

"So how come you're here, Sunny?" He sways, taking a swig from the mescal, wishing he would stop swaying. (*It's so goddamn undignified.*)

"You really want to know?"

"Uh-uh. But you're going to tell anyway."

She nods like a puppet on a loose string. "The guys downtown wants you to take out Rathbone," she tells him.

Chapter One — Dust My Broom (11/1)

Leary isn't much interested in hearing Sunny out. But he doesn't want her to go away anytime soon either. (Maybe he's in love now or maybe he's horny as a hog or maybe he just hasn't spoken to another human being for over a month.)

He thinks he should probably explain the facts for her, fill in some prerequisite background: "Rathbone and I came up through the ranks together like brothers, him taking a bullet in the thigh for me one time, me a knife in the groin for him another, you look hard you can see the movie playing in front of your face like it was real life. Which it was. And the Central Zone was our bailiwick, nobody else knowing how to keep it from blowing night after boiling night, both of us crazy as the niggers but knowing the whole fucking time any one of them could take us both out any time and not spit snot over it."

"I don't like that word," she says.

"What word?"

"Nigger."

"I'm still not going to fucking kill him for you," Leary says.

"Sure you are." She lays a warm hand on his leg above the knee, squeezes like mashed potatoes. "I'll tell you why."

Chapter Two — Terraplane Blues (11/1)

Sunny tells Leary: "William Campbell Rathbone, as you likely are aware, has served as Central Zone Captain for somewhat more than the nineteen months. There was some initial resistance to his appointment

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on the grounds that although a highly successful operational officer he was not a proven administrator, but for the first year of his tenure he was an effective if at times unconventional occupant of an historically difficult position. Then in the spring of this year, this previously observed unconventionality began to assume a more dominant aspect in his relationships both within and without the Force. He offended several ranking officers through his salty language and blunt demeanor. It became known that he had abandoned his wife of fourteen years and established living quarters in a room at the rear of his precinct station, where he was reported to fornicate nightly with a succession of mistresses from the Zone, many of them known prostitutes, sometimes two and three per evening, leaving at least one known pregnant with child. He further became an obsessive reader of the Christian Bible, specifically the four gospels of the New Testament, asserting views which while Biblical in origin were nevertheless far from conventional and even, some might assert, illegal. As an example, he strongly supported the concept of a second coming of the messiah while also proclaiming that the first messiah, our lord Jesus Christ, was a false messiah, the literal spawn of the devil. He further alleged that the being we call Satan is in actuality God while God is the devil. Additionally, he refused to attend regularly scheduled captains' meetings downtown and ceased returning phone calls from his superior officers. On June seventeenth of this year he produced an interdepartmental memo in which he severed all communication between himself, his precinct, and the rest of the city. No specific reasons for this decision were given, only that he believed it was (and here I quote) 'in the best interests of myself, the City Police Force, the citizens of the Central Zone, and all children of God and/or Cain.' Since that day no official word has been received from either Captain Rathbone or his assigned officers."

Leary grins like butter in a pan: "And you're trying to get me to think you haven't done a fucking thing about it?"

Her liquid eyes flash as cool as mercury in a bottle: "You know better than that, Leary. We made three forays. The first we sent in one man, the second three, the last a dozen in an armored cruiser."

"And Rathbone took them all out, right?"

She shrugged. "Nobody's made it back yet, no."

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"They won't. Rathbone's too fucking sly for you guys. Once he's made up his mind, the movie's done."

Sunny intones: "Captain Rathbone to this day continues to operate his command in a totally individualistic and out of control manner contrary not only to the Edicts and Ordinances of Separation but to the general good order of this city, county, state, and nation."

"So you want me to kill him for you."

"You're an experienced officer, you know the terrain, and, most crucially, you know Rathbone."

"None of which says why I'm going to do what you want."

She gives him another roiling dart with her eyes, smiles elliptically, lips like jelly, and starts ticking off on her razor red fingernails: "Reinstatement in the Department at your previous rank and grade. All due back pay and allowances up to and including Zone rations. A Special Achievement Award and accompanying official citation for valor above and beyond. And of course there's the oldest motivation of all: revenge. Totally free and unpunishable too."

"What revenge? Rathbone was my best friend."

She laughs out loud, grabs his thigh, jerks him down on the floor next to her. Her lips are inches from his. She whispers: "Now who's the dumb shit? Have a brain, Leary. Billy Rathbone snitched you out. Haven't you fucking figured that out yet?"

"He'd never — "

"He's the only one who could. Who else knew all the ragged shit you two were pulling in the Zone? Rathbone knew and when it came down to him or you, somebody to take the fall, he picked you."

"Prove it."

She pulls a micro from her waistcoat, flips it over. "Hit play and scan. It's all there. The complete official shit. While you're doing that — " she bounces lightly to her feet with the grace of a native dancer " — I'm going to piddle."

She leaves the door hanging open as she strides into the corridor. He can hear heels rap-tapping like gunfire in the desert.

Leary scans the micro.

Of course it could be a fucking forgery, he thinks.

* * *

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Chapter Three — Shake, Rattle, and Roll (11/1)

Leary twists his head from side to one. "How do I know everything in here isn't a fucking forgery?"

"You don't." She closes the door. "But you used to be a cop. Doesn't it hang together? Doesn't it make sense?"

His head keeps shaking. "I still won't die for you bastards. Drop me in the Zone and they'd spot me in an instant. I don't care how much heat I'm packing, I can't take on a whole precinct."

"We'll take care of that. They won't know you."

"How? Shoe polish? You want me to wear blackface?"

For the first time she seems hesitant: "A procedure. Even the genes are somehow altered. You won't just look native. For all intents and purposes you'll be one — body and soul."

"You're going to turn me into a nigger?" His laughter is like the baying of a hound.

She frowns. "I said it was a procedure. Much of it reversible. There may be scars though."

"You're all fucking crazy."

"You won't do it?"

"Oh, sure. Black, white, what difference does it make? Anything's better than this. There's one other thing though."

"What?"

"You."

She says, eyes batting as if irreducibly charmed: "Uh-uh, Leary. Forget it. I work for the Force. It doesn't own me."

"Afterward, then? After I snuff Rathbone?"

"How do you know he won't kill you instead?"

"I don't," he says. "That's what makes it a risk."

Chapter Four — Black Snake Moan (11/11)

He runs thick hard rough fieldhand fingers across the polished, ivory sheen, pale-as-death flesh of her shoulder blade. Muscles underneath ripple like waves in a wind.

"I could purr," she says, voice a river low in her throat. "God, I want

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you inside me again."

So am I still the same person I was before? Leary ponders, studying his reflection in the mirror above her bed. Everything about himself seems altered. (It's a feminine room, full of frilly objects, dainty things: very much her room. A scent of vanilla rife in the air.) *And I told her I wanted to fuck her dry but now that I have it's as though I've done it with another man's body, another man's dick.* Leary's sensual world has transformed itself too. Sensations are stronger, sharper...more authentic. Like lye instead of bar soap. And not just sensations: he realizes how he never believed in the immortal soul till he Changed and how now even after only a few hours in this new body he believes not only in the soul but also in God Itself and — even more crucially for his present predicament — in the devil too — in Satan. For of course Satan is real. And Satan is black. (As everyone knows. It's in the Bible.) And because he — Leary — is now black too — and just as real — so if Leary exists, then Satan must exist too. But not as evil: this is where the first great fallacy appears. And why the Preachings of Rathbone (at least in the form explicated by the gloriously lovely barenaked plumpbutted Sunny as he enters her again, this time from behind) upon which he has considerably — and consistently — meditated at length (squeezing fuzzy cheeks) makes no fucking logical sense whatsoever no how, no way. Which is how come it all got turned around wrong in the first place: this whole coonshow thing where God is supposed to be white and Satan black so the one is all good (the white God) and the other evil (black Satan).

What bullshit, he thinks.

Hell, ask Sunny. (As she squirms, ready to come.) Hell, ask anybody who knows: white is the purity of the essence of falling snow and black the specter of death but they're both mixed up in the blood like wine and therefore God can be as evil as Satan and Satan as good as God and snow is death and death snow. *Oh no nothing is ever as simple as it seems, on my fucking knees, I pray to the black dog god of Satan ...*

Leary tilts, hurls his long hard arms around her chest, cups her milky breasts, one in each big hand. "I'm going to fuck you dry as a dove," he says.

("There is one other thing you probably ought to know about," she adds later in the night.

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("Like what?"

("Maybe nothing important, just rumor, but it's part of our regular intelligence briefings and I suppose you ought to know. But it's so weird I haven't said anything till now."

("What?

("Something about a new messiah being born. Like a second Jesus. We figure it's pretty much got to be tied in with Rathbone's insanity but which came first, him or the rumors, we don't know yet. Either this baby's about to be born or it's just been born and every psychic healer and Tarot dealer in the Central Zone knows all about it, where it is and what it's about, and they're all crazy excited and thinking it means something significant and important, that it's going to grow up to be the black Jesus Christ or even more. The whole story seemed to get going just about the same time Rathbone went out of control and that's why we figure the two things may be connected.")

Chapter Five — Night in Tunisia (11/12)

(This scene will be covered in a single arty long take, an elevated pan shot, the setting the broad black ribbon of a mid-city boulevard on a moonless wintry night, a few patches of snow dotting bleak pavement, a forty-foot-high cyclone fence crowned with glistening barbed wire severing the dead center of the street, the buildings on either side dark as the eyes of a vampire and windowless, big warehouses, abandoned factories, tool-and-die shops, with the solitary exception of a garishly ritzy cocktail lounge maybe half-a-block to the right, pink-and-green neon flashing, from out of which titters the occasional tinkle of laughter, the clink of glass, the lowdown rumble of nighttrain blues. Then (suddenly!) light bursts like a star going nova, the roar of an engine cracks, and a sleek streaking black limousine comes rippling down the left side of the boulevard, brakes screeching like banshees as it spins to a halt. Doors fly open like birds from their cages. Dark furtive figures emerge in long jackets and cocked fedoras. Four men — no, five — and a lone woman in a black skirt (though she appears to be the one giving orders, hands motioning). The men surge close to the fence. The woman mouths shouted instructions. A cutting grinding noise like eyes wrenched from

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their sockets: a torn hole gapes in the chain link fence. One man separates from the others. The camera pans near for a shadowy close-up: flat nose, slitted eyes, heavy lips, teeth like jewels, as he slips quicksilver-like through the hole in the fence. (The camera lunges after him, pursuing, rising, as he races stealthily into the death rattle of the night.) The others pile back into the limousine. The motor coughs, catches, surges. The limousine edges away, a round face (the woman) ambiguously pressed to the window glass. Then nothing. Only the street. And the darkness. And the tinkle of glass, the baying of laughter, the rumble of the blues.)

Chapter Six — (You Ain't Nothin but a) Hound Dog (11/13)

Being some initially selected excerpts from the journals of David Leary:

— Day 1 inside the Fence and immediately I'm finding the Zone largely as I recall tho simultaneously completely different too on account of because altho what I'm seeing as I snake my way furtively along the familiar broad streets and cracked pavements at dawn has changed little (if at all) in the intervening years, the perspective from which I'm viewing has now altered dramatically: in other words where before I was a badass white fuzz cop in a blue uniform with a black gun now I'm just another Zone dude in my long vinyl jacket and cocked fedora, my thick fieldhand fingers, my hatchet face, my raspy twang. Hey, nobody glances twice at me. (Or once?) Nor does nobody warily watch from the corners of his (or her) eyes. They do not watch because they fail to give even itty-bitty fried shit. For who am I to be watched? I am: nothing. Anonymous. Invisible. An unseen and unseeable presence. I could fade into walls. Become as one with the boulevard. I could (and have) cease(d) to exist in the blink of an eye. I am an immaterial object of no particular consequence to anyone else. And in the old days as a white beat cop riding shotgun with Rathbone it was like being on stage every waking instant, watching warily, always watching. And that distorts reality for a man. It's like a red hot pipe rammed up the ass. It gives you the crazy idea you're a lot bigger pile of shit than you really are. It's conducive to megalomania. So is this what's happened to my old partner Rathbone? I wonder as I snake the streets. Is this where it's gone wrong with him? It's a theory anyway, not that I need

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a theory to snuff Rathbone, revenge being — as always, since the time of Cain — sweet as a melon. (And by the way: I've ventured into the Zone deliberately unarmed, knowing guns are cheap and easily come by here.)

— Two hours inside the Zone, dawn well etched in the sky, and I spot my first cop walking a foot beat. Go figure but it's got to be somebody I know from before: Tony Alonzo. No buttbud or anything intimate but Alonzo and I did go round a few bases some cool hard times in the past like one fatal instant when Alonzo aced an unarmed kid in a liquor store heist and I held him tight in my arms while he cried on my shoulder and Rathbone slipped around and dropped an extra .38 in case the kid had friends. (Those were fucking wild days, for sure.) And here I am coolie squatting in front of an Ace Hardware, airing my dirty socks, when Alonzo saunters around the corner, pauses menacingly like meat in front of me, glancing down with the tips of his eyes only, wiggling shaggy brows. "What's up here, bro?" he officially inquires. "All be cool," I implore, holding up thick hands to partly shield my face, not looking away though, keeping my rasp steady in the back of my throat. I let my head loll on my neck like a drunken moo-cow. "All be very cool." Alonzo nods, considers, flicks a wry grin (showing a little tooth), nods again, taps my foot gently with his nightstick, saunters off. It's over in an instant-and-a-half. Tho only when he's well gone past does the air come rushing out of my lungs in a burst of pure orgasmic relief: *heymyfuckingGodwowohboy!* No recognition. Nowhere. (Yet one thing does disturb me: in his open top buttonhole, protruding, waves the long thin stem of a daisy.) (No, two things disturb me because later the more I think about it, the more times I run the movie through my head, the more I'm sure: Alonzo was not carrying a gun.)

— Noon Day 1 and I do lunch on the far right stool at the stained formica counter of Ol' Uncle Elmer's Hot Sauce Emporium and Bar BQ Grill located directly across from the station house. Perched inside in three booths (I count) eight cops in uniform, two in plainclothes: not a one I know from before. (Go figure.) Three have daisies in their buttonholes, a fourth a carnation, and none are packing heat, including the plainclothes. I slurp barbecue grease on a hot poppyseed bun, splashing down beer. Still the same old gaunt gray concrete fortress (the station house, I

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mean, not Uncle Elmer's), tho I note the iron bars have been removed from the windows and now there's just bare glass. My waitress is a sweet-looking high red with big teeth named Edith Elaine whom I also recollect. (She doesn't bat an eye.) *Edith Elaine,* I whisper at one point, *what's this I hear about the boys across the street? Strange doings over there, I hear, and no guns in their holsters. What gives?* But she just grins. *You been off in neverneverland playing with your pecker, old fool?* But there's no rancor in her tone, no fear. I sit there gazing dreamily through the window soaking up a second beer as one shift departs and another assumes its place. But where do they go? I wonder. None of Rathbone's troops have emerged from the Zone since the circulation of his memo of farewell.

— *And what about God?* I get to thinking later on as the day drifts inexorably toward night. Maybe what I'm thinking is that God is a lot like a cop Himself and that helps explain the suffering in the world. Maybe so many billions of people watching God all the time, waiting on Him, expecting Him to do something to set everything right, and pretty soon He just says Fuck It All and does something mean like summoning up a hurricane or starting a war or killing a baby for no reason. And then afterward He feels miserable as hell about it.

— Edith Elaine and I make a date to hit a couple joints later tonight, her in search of company, me in pursuit of further intelligence. I am sorely aware that I must be careful with my drinking so as not to say the wrong thing at the wrong time to the wrong person, endangering not only my mission but my black ass as well. Sunny cautioned me often on this point.

Chapter Seven — Potato Head Blues (11/13)

A Play in One Act

The Setting: The formica countertop of Ol' Uncle Elmer's Hot Sauce Emporium and Bar BQ Grill, the Central Zone.

The Time: November 13, 1630 Hours.

The Characters:

David Leary — undercover ex-cop looking for revenge sweet as honey.

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Edith Elaine Lyman — high red waitress and mother of Barry, age 10.

Leary (rasping): I asked bring me another beer.

Edith Elaine: And I said you already had plenty. I don't want you puking up and me having to clean after you.

Leary (with feigned sincerity): Now look here, baby *(whispering softly)* so how 'bout the two of us hopping a little later on, maybe catching some vibes, a little night music, making some of our own magic too. When you get off work, what you say, my sweet thing?

Edith Elaine: Man, you have more to drink than I thought. You crazy as a hoot owl....

Leary: And you as beautiful.

Edith Elaine (cackling): As what? As shit. Old man, you blind crazy.

Leary: Now, listen here and look at me good, this is how it's going down. You do your shift, you hang your apron on the peg, you say my good sweet lover man, where will it be? And off we go, steppin' high and handsome.

Edith Elaine: I got a little boy at home alone.

Leary: We won't be long then.

Edith Elaine: Besides I don't go steppin' with gentlemen whose names I don't know.

Leary: It's Doctor Brown.

Edith Elaine: Doctor of what? Doctor of Fools?

Leary (archly): I am a licensed veterinarian.

Edith Elaine: You gonna end up in jail for lying too.

Leary (sounding sly): But everybody tells me the cops here are sweet as molasses. Nobody goes to jail, I hear. How you figure that?

Edith Elaine (sudden fear in her eyes, tension in her voice — she speaks too loudly): I don't figure nothing where it comes to no police. Now you get out of here, you crazy old man. You get back to the crazy man's farm where you come from.

Chapter Eight — Soul Survivor (11/13)

Leary dances spinning like a merry-go-round in the midnight empty neon speckled street, whirling dervishly, arms outstretched like a bird on

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wing, feet skipping crazily *pat-a-pat-a-pat*, head tossed back like an apple, eyes shut, mouth open, and he's howling as loud as he can, screaming and laughing both at the same time, and there's a woman in a red spangled dress with a jug of mescal in her hand and she's screaming at him too, calling him lunatic and fool and crazy coot, but she's laughing almost as hard as he's laughing and finally, dizziness overwhelming them both at the same time, they collapse like balloons into each other's arms and her dress rips up the spine and the mescal jug goes flying and they land in the street and he's kissing her naked bosom and snaking his hands up under the hem of her red dress and it rips too and they're both laughing so fucking hard, eyes watering, glass shattering from the broken jug, that when the beefy moonfaced white cop comes sprinting up with his baton in his hand huge and erect like a bloated wood penis they don't even hear him.

Wham! (The baton slices down.)

Leary screams out in pain, throwing up his hands.

But it's too late.

A black pool gapes next to him. He falls into it.

Chapter Eight and one-half — Smokestack Lightning (11/14)

Speckled ceiling spinning crazily overhead like a child's kaleidoscope, Leary opens his eyes. He lies stretched on his back, legs askew, on a thin cot chained to a concrete wall. He reaches up and touches his forehead gingerly. A gob of blood comes away. He moans, skull still splintering as if under attack from insects boring from within. Cautiously, cradling his temples lovingly in his hands like the breasts of a maiden, he rolls to a sitting position and lets his feet seek out the solidity of the floor. His pants are ripped, his shirt a rag of cloth clinging to his back. Blood spatters everywhere he looks — on his chest, hands, everywhere. His own blood.

He occupies a cell. (Iron bars a prison making.)

He moans again. Even thinking hurts.

In starts and fits like a boat riding out the remnants of a storm his vision clears.

Across from him a man squats on a toilet seat, his pants hanging loose at his knees. The man is smiling beatifically as if he has only just now

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heard the funniest farmer's daughter joke of all time. ("Hot, hell, I'm six inches deep in snow," goes the punchline as Leary remembers it.)

The man wears the black clerical garb of a minister of the gospel.

The Reverend (whispering conspiratorially) sez: "You may not goddamn well know it yet, son, but the best thing in the world to happen to you was last night when good Sergeant Shaw bashed you over the head with his nightstick in the service of the Lord God Eternal."

Leary (still holding his head) responds: "Yeah, sure."

The Reverend: "No, boy, you listen to me, you were the one who was risking the fires of damnation because of the carnal relations of fornication which you might lustfully have partaken with that sinful whore of a woman with whom you were dallying."

Leary: "What are you talking about? We went out and had a couple drinks together. Edith Elaine Lyman. She's a waitress at Uncle Elmer's rib joint across the street."

The Rev. proceeds, scowling, "Your story, son, and an honestly intended one, I'm sure. But good Sergeant Shaw has a different tale to tell, an older, sadder, and far from uncommon one. The woman was a slut, a Jezebel, a whore of the Earth. Spawn of the devil, she sought to tap into your essence and through it purloin your soul. Hear my words as we sit, for when the Day of Days is proclaimed at last when all Earthly temptations will be put aside and punishments endured for all our deadly sins, then salvation must and shall be denied to those many who will thence be flung into the flaming pits of hell. I know this must transpire as surely as the turning of the Earth, for I have seen it witnessed through my own mind's eye. Remember what I preach, son, for this Day of Days draweth nigh."

Leary snaps alert in spite of his agony. Slyly, he infers, "So maybe you're talking about this new baby Jesus being born I've been hearing about."

The Rev. (cunningly): "There is no new messiah." He stands, wipes his ass, hitches up his pants. "Or old one either. There is only the one messiah which is the Truth of the Lord.

Leary sez: "You mean Jesus then?"

The Reverend curtly remarks, "Oh, no. I said no name. This Jesus was the so-called son of God only."

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Leary asks, "So what are you talking about?"

Rev. (his smile somehow even broader, more beatific, his voice an even gentler whisper): "Tell me, son, have you ever considered the possibility that even God Himself may need a god of His own to worship, a god we in our error have chosen to call Satan?"

Chapter Nine — Let's Go Get Stoned (11/14)

1. As he departs the Precinct Station later that day ushered by two uniformed cops neither of whom is the asshole who clubbed him the night before, Leary shifts his gaze, searching for any sight of Rathbone.

2. Leary uncovers nothing pertinent to his quest beyond a glazed glass door inscribed upon which are the following letters: C, A, P, T, A, I, N.

3. His escorts leave him at the high front doors. He proceeds down concrete steps to the street. It is a brilliant warm sunny day, cloudless blue sky, etc. From the left, a shadow falls over him.

4. Leary swivels his head, glancing up.

5. He discovers a sharp-tipped steel spike approximately ten feet tall and three inches in diameter protruding from the soft sandy ground, impaled vertically upon which he recognizes Edith Elaine Lyman. She is naked, bleeding profusely.

5a. Something he has somehow not previously noticed: etched in the concrete edifice of the Precinct Station above the high front doors is the design of a cross, a crucifix. The precise nature of the image upon the cross is uncertain. But it is most certainly not Jesus of Nazareth. Instead the image appears to be that of a cloven hoofed beast.

5b. Leary's gaze darts from the crucifix to the impaled woman and back to the crucifix again. "God, Edith Elaine," he murmurs like water in a brook.

6. Edith Elaine's eyes are open and staring. She appears to be looking at nothing at all.

7. A handprinted sign around her neck proclaims: *BY ORDER OF THE PRECINCT CAPTAIN*

8. A cursory examination of her wounds indicates that the tip of the spike has entered her body between the vaginal and rectal canals and exited diagonally through her right shoulder blade. Her heart therefore has not been pierced.

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9. Nevertheless, Leary is hopeful that she's dead.

10. But she isn't.

11. Her head twists, her shoulders heave. She mouths: "God, please help me. Oh my God."

Chapter Ten — Hellhound on My Trail (11/14)

Being some additional excerpts from the journals of David Leary.

— Two things are now as clear to me as a fire bell in the night. (But first an interruption for narrative purposes: staggering away in a state of extreme psychological trauma from the station house and the impaled Edith Elaine, Leary wanders aimlessly through the teeming afternoon streets of the Central Zone. (More local color herewith painted, probably in montage sequences reminiscent of forties Warner Brothers melodrama.) Then as darkness descends like a vampire's shroud Leary slips a hand into a torn pants pocket and to his surprise pulls out a rabbit's foot key ring with an address imprinted upon it. While Leary goggles at the keys nestled in his weathered palm, a flashback shot as if through the haze of memory depicts a red-eyed Edith Elaine (the night before) handing Leary her keys, saying, "This is my extra set, sweet darlin'. You use 'em now if we lose each other." Back in real time, Leary lets himself into the building, ascends rotting wooden stairs to the fourth floor, unlocks a door. Here he finds a ten-year-old boy sitting in the dimness staring at a muted television picture. (A cat and mouse cartoon, sledgehammer violence.) The boy looks up hopefully as Leary enters and sez, haltingly, "Did my — my mamma send for me?")

Chapter Ten point nine-oh-nine — Got My Mojo Workin' (11/14-11/15)

Being a continuation of the further excerpts from the journals of David Leary:

— Three things are now as clear to me as a fire bell in the night. First that Rathbone (whatever his fucking story) needs to be killed. Second that I'm the one guy ready and able to do it. The third thing, I forget at the moment, though it may have something to do with all this shit about God and Satan and Jesus and the New Messiah, how it must all mean

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something, must be leading somewhere, and where that somewhere is is scaring the holy piss out of me as I sit here in poor dead Edith Elaine's apartment, jug of red wine in one hand, cold chicken leg out of the fridge in the other, looking at this doe-eyed ten-year-old kid who just keeps looking back at me.

"Hey, man, what's your name?" I finally manage.

"Barry," he sez. "What's yours?"

I think for a second. But the kid's had too much lying in his life. Then: "Leary. But don't tell nobody."

"Who I tell?"

"Some dickhead."

"What dickhead?"

"The one who lives under the stairs and eats kids who talk out of turn."

"There ain't nobody like that."

I give him a wink. "Smart, kid. But don't tell nobody, hear?"

That night as the TV casts a greenish glow upon our shadowed faces I perch half-drunk on my end of the couch and tell Barry (my voice fake hard) that his mama won't be back. "She took the bus and went away," I say.

He knows better. "You full of shit, man. She dead."

Like I said: smart kid.

— The next day (with Barry) strolling the main boulevard I spot Rathbone for the first time as his white limo glides past like a ship at sea. In the back seat he squats alone, like a frog basking on a rock. His head turns as we pass. Our eyes lock. But there's no recognition.

"Who that, boy?" I ask softly, playing dumb.

"That there's the Devil Man," Barry shouts back.

"Who told you that? Your mamma?"

"Everybody knows the Devil Man."

— That same day (I've gone dinner shopping for two: four butchered chops, potatoes to be peeled and mashed, jar of hot mustard, butter slab, milk, sugar cookies for the boy) I see crossing the street ahead of me a beefy white man. I know him. A cop named Hogan. From the old days.

According to Sunny, Hogan was among the men dropped into the Zone to kill Rathbone.

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For the hell of it — and for intelligence gathering purposes — I follow him home.

Chapter Eleven — The Cross Road Blues (11/17)

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Chapter Twelve — Hoochie Coochie Man (11/18)

(The interrogation of the suspect Hogan commenced at 2015 hours, November 17, in unit 23b of the Sunny Dell Apartments, Central Zone, interrogating officer David Leary present, the interrogation herewith transcribed.)

Hogan (looking at the gun): So where'd you get the piece?

Leary (shrugging): On the street.

Hogan: They wouldn't let you bring it in with you?

Leary: They wanted the job done right this time.

Hogan: I can see that looking at you. (Smirking.) Hey, I hardly recognized you as a nigger.

L: Neither did Rathbone.

H (more quietly): You seen him already then?

L: Not up close. In his limo. He went riding by.

H: Ain't that some rig?

L: So why don't you tell me what's going on around here?

H: Christ, starting where?

L: With you. Like how come you didn't kill Rathbone. And why he didn't kill you. And how come you're still fucking around here in the Zone.

Chapter Twelve and a Quarter — Statesboro Blues (11/18)

Some background: Hogan was one of the men dropped into the Zone by armored cruiser in the third unsuccessful attempt at assassinating Rathbone. Leary knew Hogan off and on during his years on the Force. They even partnered together early in their careers before Leary requested reassignment to the Central Zone. Hogan was best known for his hot gun-hand, including five certified in-line-of-duty kills. Leary hated his fucking guts, always had.

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Chapter Twelve (continued) — Hoochie Coochie Man (11/18)

Hogan (finger in the air): Let me tell you a few things, Leary. First, you say you want to know how come we didn't kill Rathbone. Well, it's not like we didn't try. We came roaring down here in that fucking cruiser thinking nothing could stop us and drove straight up to the station house door, you should have seen the coons scatter, and me and Finnegan and Gordie Shaw all jump out, guns out too, flack jackets zipped, and guess who's fucking coming out the door just as we show — fucking Rathbone himself, that's who. So guess what Finnegan's got to do?

Leary: What?

Hogan: He's ranking officer and he stops dead and goes, "Captain Rathbone, put your hands on top of your head for you are now under arrest by the authority invested in me..." I mean bull fucking shit!

Leary: And?

Hogan: And so I shot Rathbone square in heart. But it was too fucking late. He hops back through the door into the arms of his guys and then about a hundred and twenty others are over us like flies on shit. That was something else we hadn't figured on. The cops here are fucking nuts about Rathbone. They'd walk through blood and water to save his ass. Like he was God.

L: So you missed.

H: Like fuck! I never missed in my life. I hit the asshole for sure, right where I said, right in the heart.

L: He's not dead, Hogan.

H: I know. And you won't believe this either. I wouldn't myself except he showed me with my own eyes. It was the Bible. The Bible he carries in his pocket. The bullet hit the fucking Bible and ricocheted. It was like a miracle.

L (taking a breath): So tell me what you know about this New Messiah thing.

Chapter Thirteen — Blind Willie McTell (11/19)

At "home" early the next morning as young Barry nods off on the couch, Leary, plate of blooded rib bones in front of him, sits cross-legged in front of the blank television screen contemplating the whole long sad

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history of race in this country. And in the contemplation he is at the same time contemplating the fate of the lush fertile world he and his species inhabit. (By the grace of God?) Brought to this land in chains and manacles, as commodities, property, as Things, he thinks, simplifying to the essence. As Things which were regarded as superficially human but also less than human. As Things to be used, to be worked until broken — like a plow or a reaper or a gin. As Things — as tools, as implements. Things to be sold. Things to be bought. Things to be bred. (And slaughtered?) Things without will (or destiny?) of their own. And Leary thinks (contemplating still) how this horror endured like a rock for centuries till the land itself rotted with the reddish stain of hell and those who owned it burned with the brand of Cain. For if God is the god of love and man created in His image, then to be human is to love also and to hate is to be bereft of humanity. Oh yes, it was indeed a long sad fucking story, he thinks. Generations died. And lived again. And died. He hears a stirring in his ears. Like the seashell wind. It is the promise never kept — the chalice never tasted. And he closes his eyes one last time and stands in bib overalls in an East Texas field and above, dangling from the tree limb, sways the carcass of a human being, neck snapped, legs and arms like twigs, and he stands so filled with shame and with horror, with guilt and with dread, that he cannot move a muscle to flee from this dream as nightmare, as truth, as history, as vision. And so, my God, why did you not make us all the same so that the hate which comes from difference did not burn in our hearts like a fire on the land? (And there is no answer to this question. Only silence, which ever reverberates.) And the years of attempted integration, he recalls, a dream pursued too little and too late, and then the savage uprisings, spreading, and the Edicts and Ordinances of Separation promulgated, and with that the final sealing of the urban walls, the erection of the great fences, the creation of the Zones. And the end of the last dream. To Leary, the more he thinks, the less he knows. For are we not all born and created equal, are we not all birthed by the same loving God? But if that God is not the true god, if He is an impostor, if in other words, the one true God is a god of evil, then it all does make sense, it rings true, he muses.

And Rathbone is right.

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Chapter Fourteen — Preaching Blues (Up Jumped the Devil) (11/18)

Leary tosses out a hand, grabs the wine jug off the formica table, gulps, wipes a greasy palm across his mouth, bangs the bottle down. "All right, asshole. So you missed your chance at a clean kill, you dumb shit. So now the question is: how come if Rathbone's alive, you're not dead? And what about your partners? Where are they?"

Hogan eyes the wine as he has all night. Beseechingly — assiduously — his need for it whines like a prayer in his face. A ham-fisted man with a round head and the blank, dazed expression of a camel. "Then can I have a drink?"

Leary speaks slowly as if the words choke in his throat: "I'll consider it."

Hogan bobs his head, licks his lips, snakes his tongue, sez, "Okay. I'll talk. Finnegan, he's what you think. Rathbone killed him. The same day. Never had a chance. You won't fucking believe what Rathbone did. He impaled Finnegan. Stuck him up on a big steel pole — "

"I know. I saw it. Not Finnegan. Another friend of mine."

"And you know the strange part, what was really awful? Poor fucking Finnegan. He stayed alive for hours. I couldn't believe it. Rathbone made us watch. Me and Gordie Shaw. Handcuffed us to the railing."

Leary nods: "Rathbone loves shit like that — teaching lessons. So what about the other guy?"

"Shaw. He went over. Rathbone must have talked him into it. He's one of his boys now."

"You too?"

"No." His voice is soft.

"What, then?"

"It don't matter."

Leary picks up the .22 pistol from the tabletop, aims the muzzle at Hogan. "Tell me, goddamn it."

Hogan averts his eyes. Perspiration beads his chin. "You want to know, Leary, I'll tell. But you'd better not fucking ever tell anybody else. I mean it."

"Who would I tell?"

Hogan nods. "Okay. Then how come I'm still alive is because

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Rathbone offered me a choice. He said which'll it be, Hogan, your balls or your life. I thought he was kidding. What would you have done?"

"I want to know what you did do."

"What do you think? I'm here, aren't I? I'm alive. But you don't see me trying to get back home either. I've got a wife and two kids, Leary, on the other side. Fuck it."

"Have a drink, Hogan."

"Really?"

"Really. You've got it coming."

As Hogan eases the wine jug to his lips, Leary shoots him through the mouth.

An Unnumbered Chapter — Big Boss Man (11/18 - 12/23)

Time passes. Leary lives a day by day existence in the Zone, taking care of Barry as if he were his own. But he's also thinking. Leary thinks: *If God is truly alive in His heaven and if the rest of us below are simply his pawns, his agents, then isn't it wisest to wait upon His hand, to see first where He is choosing to lead before plunging blindly forward? And even if as now seems likely this god whom we worship (on our knees) is a false God, is in fact the Beast in disguise, then there still must exist a Higher Force, for the existence of this universe alone is proof of that.*

And so Leary makes no immediate move to kill Rathbone.

Chapter Fifteen — Mystery Train (12/23)

The diminutive figure in the crimson coat and hood falls into step beside him as he makes his way home from the grocery store, bulging paper bag clasped to his chest like a baby to be loved. (Which means no way Leary can get to his gun in any kind of hurry to plug the bitch.)

From the scent of vanilla he knows in an instant who she is.

Sunny sez, "So, Leary, you dumb fuck, what do you think you're up to?"

He's cool as a snowfall: "On my way home for dinner."

(It's a keen, warm, gentle, absolutely gorgeous winter day, birds chiming in the treetops, warbling like warblers.)

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"Rathbone's still alive."

"I know that."

"So what the fuck are you going to do about it?"

"I guess that's the part I don't know yet."

"You crazy shit. After all he's done to you."

"Him and everybody else in the world when you come right down to it."

"Don't get pathetic with me, Leary. You've been down in the Zone long enough. You know what he's turned into."

But that, too, was a part he didn't know yet. (And he thinks how incredibly vulnerable she is, walking here beside him, a true stranger in the strange land, how one word from him could seal her fate, impaled on a spike. And the pressures that must have welled up to cause her to venture down here on her own. Assuming she is alone.)

He swivels his head but sees no one who looks obviously suspect. (Which means diddly squat.)

He waxes philosophic: "So the guys downtown are pissed are they? That's the gist of the whole fucking problem, Sunny. I have been down here in the Zone long enough. And I have seen much, much shit."

"Not so much that you couldn't ace Hogan."

"So?"

"If you can do him, do Rathbone."

"Not yet."

Her hand is on his arm. She squeezes hard. "Goddamn it, Leary. Do it. Please. Not for you. Not for me either. For everybody. He's a madman, Leary. You know that. He rides around in that fucking limo like he was God on Earth."

"Maybe he is."

"Bullshit. Gods don't need a back room stocked with sweet brown whores he fucks two and three at a time."

"Rathbone doesn't do that."

"Then what does he do?"

"It's a long story," says Leary (tiredly).

Chapter Sixteen — Stones in My Pass Way (11/18)

(In which it is revealed for all to know what Hogan responded when

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asked by Leary, "So tell me what you know about this New Messiah thing.")

Hogan sez, "It's not born yet, if that's what you're worried about. Rathbone's supposed to have the mother holed up in a room at the station house. He wants everybody to think it's a bunch of hookers he's got back there but it's really only this one girl, the mother, and the one thing Rathbone ain't doing is fucking her, let me tell you. The way I hear, every night he goes in there and gets down on his knees and worships in front of her and cries like a baby and begs forgiveness. Who he's supposed to be begging, I don't know. Maybe her. Maybe God. Maybe somebody or something — else. They say you can hear him from every fucking corner of the station house, even from outside. I haven't been around to listen. Finnegan said he saw her too. The mother. Rathbone took him back there before he killed him. He said here's your chance to be forgiven, Finnegan. Finnegan told him to shove it up his ass. Maybe me too if I'd said go ahead and hang me on the spike, I would've seen her too. But I didn't. Finnegan said she was just a little kid, no more than like fourteen, but pregnant as a whale. Some kind of albino kid, he said. White looking but with heavy nigger features. Didn't talk, he said. Never let out a peep. But he said she scared the living shit out of him. Just looking at her did it. He said after that he was almost fucking glad to die. And he was shivering all over when he said it too. Ugly. Like I'd never seen him before. And then they grabbed him and stuck him on that spike and that was the end of it. He never screamed. I bet all Rathbone's boys have seen her at least one time too. That's how come they believe like they do. They're scared shitless. Now some'll try and tell you Rathbone's the father but if it's really like the son of the nigger god, then, shit, nobody's the real father. Except Him. God."

"So when's the baby to be born?"

"Christmas Eve." He laughed. "When do you think?"

"Have a drink, Hogan."

"Really?"

"Really. You've got it coming."

As Hogan raises the wine jug to his lips, Leary shoots him through the mouth.

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Chapter Seventeen — Death Don't Have No Mercy (12/23)

In which Leary comes home and finds Barry gone, snatched (he assumes) by Sunny and/or her agents. Alone, he drinks himself asleep and suffers a dream in which he and Rathbone debate the meaning of the New Messiah, whether it's good or evil or what. Then a scrawled note arrives signed by Sunny saying he must either kill Rathbone or else never see Barry again. What shit, he thinks.

Chapter Eighteen — 32-20 Blues (12/24)

The assassination scene will be done in a single extended take shot from an objective eye level viewpoint, the idea being to replicate through deliberate image manipulation the visceral impact that almost everyone has experienced while witnessing an actual real time assassination on television. A crowded corridor. Inside the bowels of Rathbone's station house: perhaps a subtitle to so indicate. And a dateline — *December 24.* Bare wood benches splintered along each side of the corridor, the walls painted in heavy gray-green splotches. Lots of cops surging back and forth, their uniforms providing a splash of color though often damp, soaked, covered by black rain slickers, puddles of water shimmering on the floor — it's raining like hell out tonight. Much cacophony. Voices clashing like hot wires. Shouts. Howls. Few words actually decipherable. Upon the wood benches a dozen shabbily dressed men and an equal number of women resplendent in satin, lace, and cheap leather idly sit. (The idea is to get across a quick impression of the criminal classes.) The people on the benches are black, the cops white. Then from around a corner at the end of the corridor a knot of five or so new cops materializes. Surging. These are different from the other cops. Soldiery. Disciplined. Martial in their attitude and bearing. They seem almost to be marching in step to the beat of a soundless drum. (Bootheels rapping on the wet tile floor.) Suddenly — at the first apparition of the knot: silence. Heads swivel like cranes turning in unison to look. The man hunched in the dead center of the knot can barely be glimpsed. His cap and collar glitter with braid, silver captain's insignia glistening like a star. No one utters a word. They stare like cats wakened from a nap. (For the first time the sound of the rain

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pounding like hammer and nails on the rooftop can be heard.) And now the assassin emerges. Lunging past the camera from the opposite end, clenched in his fist the black bulk of a .22 pistol, the camera blurry now, as if peeping through the window of a dream. The assassin wears black, knit cap down over his eyes. Shots ring out. (Or do shots truly ring? They crack, they explode, they burst, they boom, they thud, they go bang-bang-bang.) Three shots in succession: *bang! bang! bang!* The cop in the middle of the knot — the captain! — topples like a puppet from a severed string, cap saucering off his head. Now the noise detonates: a woman screams wordlessly, a man yells, "Hey, look out, the fucker's got a gun!" Cops hurl themselves on top of the assassin, bringing him down. One more gunshot rings out — muffled. The camera tilts, bucks, sways, topples, falls. Glass shatters like a broken goblet. The image is now cracked, spiderwebby. Abruptly there looms a huge close-up of the assassin's face lying with his cheek squashed flat against the floor, one eye glassily staring. "Got the motherfucker!" screams a voice. "Get a doctor!" screams another. "Oh, fuck fuck fuck, he's dying," says a third. "I know he's dying. *Oh, no, oh, no, my God, fuck no no no!*"

Chapter Nineteen — Fattening Frogs for Snakes (12/25)

"I think the only really lousy Christmas I had when I was a kid," Leary tells Barry as they finish Christmas dinner, "was when I was probably about ten and I'd asked for all this stuff, I don't even remember what now, games and toys and shit, and like every year I'd always be poking through the house — we lived in this big old barn of a white house out in the woods: and we raised all these animals, not just dogs and cats and fish but ducks and rabbits, bantam chickens, we even had a goat one time, you would've loved it there — me poking around trying to find the presents my parents had bought but, Jesus, this one time — guess what? — it sure wasn't funny, then, even if it is now, this one year I really fucked up and looked too good and I found them, found all my presents, so guess what? — I bet you already figured it — none of the stuff I asked for was there — I don't really know why either, still don't to this day, because usually whatever I wanted, no matter how stupid, my parents went out and got it, it was like their yearly ritual every year my mom and dad going to a loan company

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and borrowing the money to get Christmas presents for the kids — the four of us — and then taking the rest of the year to pay the money back because that was the one serious expense in their whole lives — it wasn't like they wore good clothes or went on a lot of vacations — they couldn't afford any of that — not that any of this was stuff I knew then of course — it was years later before I figured it out — and my sister who died in the Third Uprising, she told me a lot of it — but you know, that's how it went that year, what I wanted for Christmas was not what I was getting — and I'm telling you now, I felt like shit and what was worse — think about it — what was worse was, what could I do about it? I mean, look, I didn't dare say anything, I didn't want to get my ass chewed, I didn't want them thinking I was a snoop even if I was, and I couldn't go up and say, look, Mom and Dad, guess what? I know what you got me for Christmas and it's not what I want, so why don't you just take it back and get me something else? So I had to suffer in silence, acting noble like I didn't know shit when I did, and I felt lousy the whole time right up, I think, to the day itself and then all of a sudden that morning it just didn't seem important anymore, once it was actually Christmas Day everything was basically okay. Christmas was still Christmas. But I never went snooping after that either. I learned to let things be."

Chapter Twenty — If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day (12/24)

Leary sez, "I know I had to mark you. I fired three fucking bullets. No way I'm going to miss that many times, not from that range, not even with a .22. No fucking way in hell."

Grinning, lips peeling back like the skin of a snake, Rathbone slips a hand in his blue coat. He pulls out a Bible and holds it in the air, letting the pages flutter.

"No, goddamn it," Leary says, shaking his head. "Goddamn it, no, not again."

Rathbone is laughing. He's got four uniformed men behind him, two of them with their guns out. The windowless interrogation chamber. White walls. Two-sided mirrors. Leary knows the room well. He once saw a man beaten to death in here, blood running onto the floor like a pool.

"You shot Hogan," Rathbone says, his voice like a hoarse whisper.

"Maybe. So?"

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"What did he tell you before he died?"

Leary spreads his hands. "He told me all sorts of shit."

Rathbone's mouth creases. "Did he tell you that God was on my side?"

"Are you so fucking sure He is?"

Rathbone wags the Bible in his hand. "What do you think, David?"

"That's not God."

"It isn't?"

The room seems barely bigger than a closet, two steel-backed chairs one on either side of a formica table. Leary is secured to his chair by manacles on both wrists.

"I don't intend to have you executed," Rathbone says.

"Why not?"

Rathbone shrugs, shoulders rising and falling almost imperceptibly. "And the little boy will be returned to you too, if that's the other thing bothering you. As soon as you and I are finished here. You'll then be free to go."

"How do you know I won't come after you again?"

"You won't."

"But how do you know?"

A skeletal smile. "What would be the point? It doesn't matter. Don't you understand, David? I can't be killed."

"Bullshit. You're not God."

"No. But as I explained: He's on my side. For now. At least until the child is grown."

"The Messiah?"

"So they say."

"He's been born, then?"

"This morning at dawn. She was."

"Can I see him — her?"

"Of course."

"Where are they?"

"I'll take you."

"Now?"

"If you want."

Rathbone motions to one of the cops behind him. The man nods,

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holsters his gun, walks around the table, unlocks Leary's manacles.

Leary comes slowly to his feet, knees shaky. "I want you to know I don't give a shit whether you live or die."

Rathbone remains seated. "Nor do I, David."

Now it's Leary's turn to shrug. "That's your problem, not mine. What about Sunny? Is she dead too?"

"Not yet, I believe."

"When?"

"Oh, soon. Justice must be served."

"That's murder, not justice."

"And Hogan?" His eyes dance, the lids fluttering like parchment, not skin. Then a hand rises from his lap and cuts through the air. He points to the door in the far wall. "This way," he says.

Chapter Twenty point five — Baby, Please Don't Go (12/25)

As Leary and Rathbone descend the concrete steps outside the station house, a shadow falls upon them.

Leary glances left.

Sunny.

Impaled.

On the spike.

Before he can speak Rathbone reaches inside his coat, pulls out a gun, and blows the top of her head off.

It is an act of mercy.

For the first time all day Leary feels a welling up of hope.

Chapter Twenty-one — The Cross Road Blues (12/25)

The house lies nestled on a back avenue far from the press of traffic. But the street is awash with people today, a hundred or more, none of them speaking now, people just standing and waiting expectantly.

They put Leary in mind of mourners at a funeral.

But no one seems to be grieving.

Rathbone cuts a path through the crowd. People step back to let him pass.

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The house is warm, almost stuffy. There is a pine fresh scent in the air. An elderly black man in a white coat and rimless spectacles sits on the davenport. He glances up as Rathbone passes.

The two men nod at one another.

Rathbone gestures at a door in the wall. "In here," he says.

Leary follows.

As Leary steps through the door to behold the mother and the child, the New Messiah, the black messiah, the child who is both daughter of God and of the creature who is not god but God's god and who is known sometimes as Satan, he finds himself filled again with hope.

For beyond the door a light is brightly shining.

And for a moment he can see nothing.

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Take heart, o winter-weary readers! (Those of you in the Southern Hemisphere can disregard these comments, or save them for six months, as you see fit.) Kedrigern's latest adventure is apt to warm the cockles of your heart, or at least make you feel like you've got no reason to complain about needing to shovel again. You think you've got problems! Read on...

Cold Comfort

By John Morressy

TRAVEL, ESPECIALLY IN wintertime, was not one of Kedrigern's delights. But when an old and faithful client begs for help, a wizard cannot resist. And when the client is Vosconu the Openhanded, travel is sure to be rewarded with prompt and generous payment. Thus it was that Kedrigern departed from his home on Silent Thunder Mountain in the midst of a cold snap, and returned a month later, in the thick of a snowstorm, to find his wife and house-troll gone.

The house was in perfect condition, tidy and orderly, not so much as a dish out of place. There had been no struggle. A careful search revealed no note, nothing missing, and no sign of an intruder. They were simply gone, utterly gone, without a trace.

The first thing Kedrigern did after getting over his initial surprise was to lay a fire. The house was frigid with more than usual cold. Clearly, it had been unoccupied since shortly after his departure. He could only be grateful that the doors and windows had been shut. When the fire had caught, and warmth had begun to seep slowly from the fireplace, he drew

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up a chair, put his feet on the hob, and tried to reason out what might have happened.

No one had burst in and carried them off. There was no sign of forced entry. Besides, Spot would have put up a fight and Princess would have used her magic to resist. So that was out as a possibility.

She might have received an urgent summons, and departed instantly with Spot for protection and company. In such a case, she would have packed a few items of clothing—a cloak, at the very least—and left a note. But nothing was missing from her closets. And who would summon her so, and with such urgency that she would depart forthwith, and not await Kedrigern's return? That, too, seemed an unlikely explanation.

What remained was magic. Enchantment. Wizardry. A spell, charm, cantrip, incantation, conjuration, or some such thing, and of a very high quality. That was a distinct possibility. The more Kedrigern thought about it, the more likely it seemed.

He roused himself, drew out the medallion that hung around his neck, and raised it to his eye. Peering through the Aperture of True Vision, he surveyed the room, sweeping it quickly at first, then more slowly, and finally studying it inch by inch.

On the floor near the doorway he found the first trace of magic, faint but unmistakable. With great effort he was able to trace a path of footsteps from the outside door into the great room. Someone magical had entered, quite openly from the look of the steps, and been received in this very room. This, presumably, was the person who had carried, or led, his wife and house-troll off to parts unknown.

The residue of the footsteps was so slight and faint that Kedrigern could learn nothing more from them without assistance. He went at once to his workroom, still as cold as a tomb, took three enormous volumes from the shelves, and hurried back to the warmth of the hearth. There he settled to begin his search.

His first resource was the much-thumbed *Spells for Every Occasion.* Under the rubric of *Summonings* he found the spell entitled "To Summon Up An Unidentified Essence, Either Dead, Distant, Or Sleeping, For Informational Purposes." Preparation for this one took time, but it was a good dependable spell. He set to work at once.

By the time the ring was drawn and the candles lit and placed in proper

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position, the room was pleasantly warm. Rubbing his hands briskly together, Kedrigern cleared his throat and began to recite the spell. When he was done, he waited, his eyes fixed on the center of the ring, where the figure he had summoned would soon manifest itself. But nothing appeared. He waited, his patience ebbing, and at last a deep hollow voice intoned, "The essence you seek is not available for summoning."

This was most unusual. "Then tell me the name of this essence," said the wizard.

"I cannot reveal that information."

Kedrigern bit his lip and took a deep breath. It did not do to shout at spirits, however trying their ways. "All right, then, show me a likeness."

"I cannot reveal that information, either."

"Well, reveal something! I want to know who came into my house and carried off my wife and house-troll, and I worked this spell to find out. So far you've been no help at all."

After a very long pause, the voice said, "This spell has been blocked. I suggest you try another."

"Who blocked it?"

"I cannot reveal that information."

With an exasperated growl, Kedrigern blew out the candles. Muttering under his breath, he returned to his speller, leafed through the pages, and came to the section *Identifications*, which contained a single spell. He groaned. Any spell of such a general nature was sure to involve a tedious and confusing menu of options. But there was no avoiding it. Identification of the footprints would narrow his search considerably. Should have begun with this one, he told himself peevishly as he redrew the ring and set up the requisite twelve candles in facing pairs.

This time the response was quicker. A voice higher than the first, flat and impersonal, said, "Thank you for using *Identifications*. If you wish identification of a person, blow out the first candle on your left. If you wish identification of an animal, blow out the second candle on your left. If you wish identification of an inanimate object — "

The voice stopped abruptly as Kedrigern blew out the third candle on his left. After a brief pause, a different voice said, "Welcome to *Identification of an Inanimate Object*. If the object you wish identified is smaller

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than a cauldron, blow out the first candle on your right. If it is larger than a cauldron but smaller than — "

Kedrigern blew out the proper candle, sighed, and waited. A nasal voice said, "Please name the object you wish identified."

"The magical footprints within the circle."

"One moment, please."

After a long delay followed by anxious background whispering, the same voice, now petulant, said, "Please stand by. We have encountered difficulties."

"What sort of difficulties?"

"The footsteps are those of an ancient crone, but they appear to have been made by a frost giant."

Kedrigern thought for a moment, then said, "Maybe the frost giant was a shapechanger. Some of them are, you know."

A long pause, then the nasal voice said, "That is possible."

"It's more than possible, it's very likely. This house was colder than it's ever been. Frost giants have that effect, even when they're in another shape."

"If you are satisfied with the identification, we will terminate the search."

Kedrigern was not at all satisfied. But he did not expect to learn anything more, and so he muttered, "Yes, yes, go ahead, terminate." The room was still once more.

A frost giant was a bad person to encounter, especially when he was also a shapechanger. Frost giants had all sorts of nasty magic, and they lived in terrible places full of snow and ice and unrelenting wind that somehow managed to be always blowing in one's face. That was the limit of Kedrigern's knowledge on the subject, and the available literature was skimpy. But if a frost giant had carried off Princess and Spot, there was nothing for it but to head north and prepare for a battle of magics. Someone was going to pay for this, and pay dearly.

He dug out his warmest cloak, gloves, and boots, and the Cap of Comfort given him by a grateful client many decades ago and seldom used. It was a tiny skullcap, no bigger than the palm of his hand, which conferred a comfortable climate on the wearer in any weather. Unaccustomed to wearing headgear, he seldom used it. Now it might come in handy.

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As he packed food for the journey, he remembered, to his relief and delight, that Bess the Wood-witch had once studied runes with a skald from the remote north. Her hovel was not far away, and it was on the road north. A visit to her was certain to be rewarding and informative.

He set out on the following morning, astride Unnamed, his great black steed, the silver-horned, silver-hoofed, fiery of eye and breath. He considered it the ideal mount for an encounter with a frost giant. The snow had stopped and the wind during the night had cleared most of the road. The horse had no difficulty breaking through the infrequent drifts.

A league from Bess's hovel, the ground was clear and the trees bare of snow. The air was pungent, and grew steadily more pungent as he neared her dwelling. When Kedrigern dismounted, his eyes watering, Unnamed exhaled twin jets of flame from his nostrils. They blazed a lurid blue in the highly fortified air.

"It will be a short visit, my friend," said the wizard, patting his neck. "If I stay more than a few minutes, we'll both pass out."

He headed directly for a small outbuilding, from which clouds of steam were escaping. He knew the cause. Bess was cooking up a batch of the brew she used for professional purposes. He pushed open the door and staggered back from a powerful blast of hot and potent steam.

"Keddie, love, what a grand surprise!" she cackled at sight of him. Her voice was muffled by the cloth wrapped around the lower portion of her face. "Here, now, cover your mouth and your nose and let's step outside where we can breathe."

Coughing and gasping, blinking helplessly, he put both gloved hands over his mouth and nose and backed into the open. When he had recovered, he said, "I need help, Bess. Princess is gone."

"She never left you! I don't believe you! You two were close as — "

"No, no, Bess. She and Spot were carried off by a frost giant."

"Oh. Ah." Bess wrinkled her leathery brow in thought, then said, "Was it about a month ago, Keddie?"

"It was. Did you see anything, Bess?"

"I didn't see anything, but I remember feeling an awful chill pass over the countryside one night just about then. I mentioned it to my familiar. 'Feels to me like that miserable frost giant is passing through,' I said. Those were my very words."

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"Then I must know all you can tell me about frost giants."

"There's only one left. His name is Harmr, and he lives in a storm-castle up north in Rimegard, on the frozen sea. He's a bad lot, Keddie. Old Gnurri told me about him."

"Did he tell you how to deal with him?"

"Not exactly. But he taught me lots of runes and charms and secrets and all. Come inside the hovel and I'll tell you all I know."

The air was much more breathable inside Bess's tumble-down hovel, and Kedrigern seated himself comfortably while she related all she knew of Harmr and the lore of frost giants and their ways, their powers and potency and their weakness. "They can cause you a lot of trouble with their runes and charms, but the one thing that will protect you is the spell against camel bites. It works beautifully against frost giants. Do you know it?"

Kedrigern brightened and sat forward. "As a matter of fact, I just used it! An old client of mine has been given a camel, and he's terrified of being bitten. I'm just back from putting the bite-protection spell on him."

"Well, that will keep you safe from Harmr's magic. But he's a clever one, Keddie. If he finds that his magic doesn't work, he'll try trickery. And Harmr is full of tricks."

"I'll be on the lookout."

"One thing more: do you have anything of Princess's with you? Harmr usually works a charm for forgetfulness on the people he carries off, and only a familiar possession can counter it."

"I packed a nice warm cloak of hers, and boots, and a pair of mittens. And a few trinkets she likes."

"Very sensible. She'll need them. And take this for yourself," the wood-witch said, handing him a slender crystal vial. "It ought to be a great help. It's the pure potion. Oldest recipe in the world, that is."

Kedrigern took the vial. It was about the size of his index finger and contained perhaps two spoonfuls of milky liquid. He gave Bess a smile of professional approval. "It's warm. It's wonderfully warm."

"Keep it close to you, and you won't feel the cold no matter how much of it Harmr turns against you. It'll keep your horse warm, too, as long as you're near him. But whatever you do, don't drink it."

"Powerful, is it?"

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"What you've got there is enough to melt Harmr and his castle and half the icebergs in the northern seas, and turn everything in sight into something else. Don't be careless with it. Consider it a last resort."

"I will, Bess. And thanks from all three of us."

"Glad to help you, Keddie. I owe you a lot, after all the trouble I caused you."

"That's all in the past," said Kedrigern.

"That reminds me," said Bess, "I'll be making up a batch of Old Fenny Snake, now that I'm done with my base."

He gave a little involuntary shudder at the remembered effects on a quiet gathering of Old Fenny Snake, Bess's private all-purpose mixture for social uses. "You're quite busy these days."

"Oh, Old Fenny Snake is no trouble at all. Just a drop of what's in that vial added to seventy-nine gallons of nice pure spring water, and I've got all I need for years to come."

Kedrigern tucked the vial securely in his belt and rose carefully. "No wonder this will keep me and my horse warm. I only hope we don't boil away."

"You will if you spill it," said Bess. "Have a lovely trip."

The journey northward, while not what anyone could describe as lovely, was at least swift and uneventful, as free of delays and complications as it was of life and growing things. Nine days later Kedrigern arrived at the foot of the ice-covered mountain known as Rimegard. At its top rose something dark and massive, vaguely like a castle, constantly shifting in shape and form. It was all of whirling snow, sleet, slush, hail, and ice enshrouded in a violent tumble of gloomy clouds, and was undoubtedly Skutherheim, the storm-castle of the frost giant Harmr.

Pausing only long enough to protect himself with the camel-bite spell, Kedrigern urged his mount on. The great black stallion made his sure-footed way over the icy path up the slope, over the causeway, through the gaping gates and into Harmr's stronghold. Icy winds buffeted man and beast, curtains of sleet and needles of hail struck at them, but they rode on unperturbed, through doors of rune-carven ice and into the great hall, down its frosty length to the foot of the throne on which a large individual sat in chill solitude, surrounded by wuthering, blustering whirls of sleet and snow. Here Kedrigern halted, but did not dismount. He drew back his

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hood and looked into the expressionless face of the one seated on the throne: pale-skinned, blue-haired, icy-eyed, clad in glittering silver mail over which was flung a cloak of frost.

"I've come for my wife and troll," Kedrigern said. "I want them back, and I want them now."

"And who are you, who come so boldly to Skutherheim?"

"I am the wizard — the very impatient wizard — Kedrigern of Silent Thunder Mountain."

"You don't look like much of a wizard."

"You're not much of a giant."

"Fool! I am at home, relaxed. When I wish to be, I am tall as a mountain. I cross seas with a single step."

"I don't much care if you can grow big enough to stick the world in your ear. Just hand over Princess and Spot. When you've done that, we can discuss compensation for the annoyance you've caused."

Harmr sneered down on him. "A wizard. You think that you will cast a spell and take what you like from my stronghold."

"If you're stupid enough to make it necessary, that's just what I'll do."

"I have runes and charms of power to shrivel you up like a frozen leaf. I need only speak — "

"You've been trying to work your runes and charms since I crossed the causeway, and they haven't done any good. Give it up, Harmr. Your runes are old fashioned and your charms are feeble against my magic. Don't try shapechanging, either. I've got spells to deal with that. Just get down to business."

Winds howled and sheets of snow rose and fell in great swirls as Harmr cried, "I am Harmr, last and greatest of the frost giants, great-grandson of Aurgelmir, grandson of Thrudgelmir, son of Bergelmir! I merit your respect and gratitude, wizard, not your insolence. Know that I honor lowly mortals by bringing them to my castle. I give them unchanging perfection!"

"Maybe they don't want it."

Harmr's voice dropped to a low confiding croon. "But what if they do? You know not what words passed between your wife and troll and me. Are you so certain that they wish to return to the changing world of mortals, that place of fleeting shadows where nothing endures? Reflect on it,

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wizard. Your wife is the loveliest of women now, but time will steal her beauty. Only in Skutherheim will she be eternally young, eternally beautiful, frozen forever in the perfection of her beauty. You will say you love her — "

"I do."

"Then why would you condemn her to age and decay and death? And your troll, so faithful now, will grow ever more like its kind as the centuries pass. It will become violent and wicked, an enemy of mankind, and you will be forced to take drastic measures."

"I think Spot will turn out well. It's had a good upbringing."

"And what of you, good wizard?" Harmr said, leaning forward, his pale eyes softening into a look of genuine concern. "You, too, are prey to time. Your spells will weaken, your memory fail as the centuries pass."

"That's life, Harmr."

With a triumphant gesture, the frost-giant said, "My point exactly: that is life! But I can offer something better. Think, wizard. I can reunite you with your wife and your troll, preserve her forever young and beautiful, keep the troll loyal and obedient, and you forever at the peak of your powers — powers far greater than my own, I do acknowledge — and give you the companionship of the greatest and finest and most perfect of creatures as companions."

Watch out for tricks, Kedrigern reminded himself. This one's as smooth as a polished apple. Must be related to Loki somewhere along the paternal line. With Loki, it might be the maternal line, as well. Or both. Those shapechangers are shifty. Listen to him, but be careful.

"Who are these perfect companions? I don't see anybody here."

"I will take you to them," said Harmr, rising. "Come with me."

"I didn't come for a tour. I came for my wife and troll."

"Are you afraid? Surely a wizard so powerful fears nothing from a frost giant whose magic is feeble and outmoded."

Kedrigern pondered the offer. He did not trust the giant one bit, but he saw little risk. The camel-bite spell had shielded him against all Harmr's efforts so far, and the vial of Bess's brew had kept him and his stallion comfortably warm. He had not had to use the Cap of Comfort. The danger seemed minimal, and he might see something interesting. "Lead on. I'll stay on my horse, if you don't mind," he said.

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Astride his black horse, Kedrigern was at eye-level with the giant. They chatted companionably as they proceeded along the frozen corridors and up a long staircase of ice blocks. Harmr commented several times on the horse's sure-footedness.

"An excellent steed, wizard. The very perfection of horses. What is his name?"

"I did not presume to name him. When he desires a name, he'll let me know."

"Oh, if he were mine, I would find him a proper name. But that, alas, will never be," said Harmr with a cold sigh.

At the top of the staircase stood a high pair of smooth bluish-white doors. A word from the giant and they squealed slowly open on icy hinges to reveal a spacious hall. The ceiling was so high it could not be seen through the clouds that swirled and tumbled overhead. The walls, where they were visible through mist and blowing snow, were lined with what appeared to be windows. Harmr led the way to one and gestured grandly.

"Behold your wife, wizard. Does she not look serene, and as beautiful as ever? Does not your troll appear contented?" he said.

"It's good for you that they do. Now get them out of there."

"In a moment. Allow me first to show you some of my choicest specimens," said Harmr, leading the way around the chamber. Through succeeding windows Kedrigern saw women of astonishing beauty, men of heroic bearing, and heaps of treasure. Some of the men and women were of races and colors the wizard had never seen, or even known to exist, and were dressed in exotic apparel; but each was undeniably perfect of its kind. The treasures were dazzling in their variety, opulence, and abundance.

"I also have a splendid dragon, and palaces of most interesting design, if you would care — "

"Maybe later, Harmr," said the wizard. "First let's go back and set Princess free and decide how you'll make all this up to her. And me. And Spot."

They paused before the window — actually a flawlessly clear sheet of ice thick as a man's outstretched arms — and studied Princess for a time. She was dressed in a gleaming white cloak trimmed with soft white fur, interwoven with silver threads and set with tiny diamonds. A necklace of

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diamonds glittered around her neck, and diamond bracelets adorned her wrists. Diamond rings shone on her fingers and diamonds gleamed on her white slippers. She did indeed appear to be at perfect repose, reclining on a comfortable couch, one hand draped casually along the back of the couch and the other resting on Spot's head in an affectionate gesture. Spot, too, seemed content, but it was hard to tell with a troll.

"Where did she get that cloak and the slippers? And all those diamonds? I don't recognize any of that."

"They were my present to her."

"The old crone's present, you mean."

"I should have known that such a great wizard would uncover my stratagem," said Harmr with a courteous bow. "Yes, I came to her as a kindly aged woman bearing gifts from an old acquaintance. I find that women are much more willing to admit such a one than to speak with a frost giant."

"So Princess tried them on, and stepped outside to see the diamonds in the sunlight, and you whisked her off."

Harmr took a step back, looking hurt. "You do me an injustice, wizard. There was no whisking. I am no abductor. You may ask the lady herself."

At a murmured phrase and a gesture of his hands, the window first clouded, then turned to a white vapor that drifted upward and dissipated. Kedrigern rode into the chamber, which was quite sizable, and quickly dismounted. He took Princess in his arms. She stirred slightly. Her skin was cold, but her color was good, her breath was regular, and she did not shiver. In joy at finding her, and relief at her apparent good health, he momentarily forgot about his host. But at a hissing and crackling from behind him, he turned and saw the window of ice once more in place. Outside, Harmr was laughing.

"Thank you for adding two more items to my collection, wizard," he said with a wicked smile. "You are under an older charm than any you know or can counter, encased in cold older than the world. You will not escape, nor will your magic keep you warm forever. But be of good cheer. I will not separate you from your wife. You will be together forever. Enjoy your reunion."

Harmr stayed for a time to gloat, but when Kedrigern did not react to

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his taunts, the frost giant lost interest. When he had left, with much triumphant laughter, Kedrigern took stock of the situation. Bess's brew was still keeping him comfortable, but now that he had dismounted, his horse was showing a coating of rime. He quickly remounted.

The brew would last for some time. When it showed signs of weakening, he had the Cap of Comfort to fall back on, so there was no immediate danger of freezing. He had time for the calm reasoning such a situation required. The main problems were first of all freeing Princess and Spot from whatever enchantment Harmr had placed on them, and then getting out of this place.

First things first. He tried five basic warming spells on Princess, one after the other, to absolutely no effect. This was more serious than he had anticipated. Harmr had done something more than simply cast a spell, or charm, or read some chilly runes over her. He studied Princess closely, looking for some sign. His horse pawed impatiently at the icy floor of the chamber, and Kedrigern patted his neck to reassure him.

He remembered then Bess's reference to a forgetfulness spell. Even if he could awaken Princess, would she remember anything? He reached inside his cloak and drew out the bundle in which he had packed one of Princess's favorite cloaks, of bright red lined with golden wool. Not only was it comfortable, it was warm — ideally suited to these conditions — and much more becoming, he thought, than what she now was wearing. That cold white, and those frigid diamonds, simply did not suit her. She looked best in the colors of summer and autumn. How the old crone had induced her to wear such an unsuitable outfit....

He gave a little happy cry, and a laugh, and jumped down from the saddle. Surely the outfit itself was the key. Cloak and jewels had enchanted Princess, and the magic flowed through her to affect Spot. Chuckling to himself, he quickly unfastened the diamonds and the robe and pulled off the frost-colored slippers. Dressing Princess in her bright red robe and fur-lined boots and mittens, he fastened a golden necklace set with garnets around her neck, drew gold bracelets over both her wrists, and set a slender golden coronet on her brow. He took the Cap of Comfort from his shirt and placed it neatly within the circlet of the coronet. Then he stepped back and tried the awakening spell once again.

She stirred. She blinked. She raised a hand to rub her forehead. She

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looked up and saw Kedrigern beaming down on her, and in a moment they were in a close embrace, interrupted only by Spot's tentative, chilly, "Yah?"

"Keddie, where are we? How did I get here?" she asked, looking around her in bewilderment. "Why am I wearing...? Did you...? How could you manage...?"

"Well, I know you like that cloak. And I thought you'd need warm boots and mittens. And the necklace and bracelets go so well with them...."

She gave a tug here and there, smiled, smoothed out a wrinkle, and said, "You'd make a very good maid. Thank you. But what happened? How did I get here? The last thing I remember is chatting with a sweet old woman who brought me a lovely new outfit from a sorceress friend of yours. Do you remember Ulurel?"

"I do indeed, and she was a good friend. Unfortunately, the sweet old lady was not. She was a frost giant in disguise."

"It was a brilliant disguise. She was only four feet tall."

"The frost giant is also a shapechanger. And a collector of perfect specimens."

Princess pondered that for a moment, then said, "And we have been collected."

"Yes, along with others. And now that you're yourself again, all we have to do is get out of this place."

"A hot spell?"

"That may not be necessary." Kedrigern reached into his belt and carefully drew out the vial given him by Bess. Removing the cap, he blew the emergent vapor in the direction of the window. At once the surface clouded. It quickly grew moist, then began to run, and within a minute had melted completely.

"What is that?" Princess asked in a hushed voice.

"It's Bess's brew, pure and uncut, just as it comes from the cauldron. It kept us warm all the way here."

"It's more powerful than anything Harmr's got."

"Considerably. It should have all these windows melted in very short order. And then we'll see about Harmr."

Kedrigern set the open vial on a mound in the center of the hall.

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Within minutes the windows had begun to melt, and in no more than a quarter of an hour all the specimens in Harmr's collection were free. By this time the water was ankle-deep, and the walls showed signs of mushiness. A thick mist was settling over the hall, threatening to obscure all vision in a very short time. Kedrigern took up the vial, stoppered it securely, and tucked it in his belt. The excited chatter of the liberated captives and the noise of dripping, sloshing water made for considerable commotion. Raising his hands, the wizard said in a loud voice, "Listen, everyone! We are all prisoners in the castle of a frost giant. If you'll do as I say — "

"Who are you?" demanded a large man in a shirt of ring-mail and a pair of hairy trousers. He wore a horned helmet and carried a double-edged ax. His wooden shield was bound with iron straps and painted in bright colors.

"Yes, who are you?" said a tall, black warrior. His shield was long and narrow, covered with the skin of some unknown beast, and his spear extended a foot above the top of his plumed headdress.

"I am the one who freed you from those cold cages. And if you cooperate, I'll see to it that you all get back to where you came from."

"What if this is a trick? I've been tricked once — " a man in rich robes began, but was silenced by a small slender woman, pale as ivory, dressed all in gold. In a voice accustomed to command, she said, "Silence! This man is our hope of returning to our empires, and he must be obeyed!" With a bow to the wizard, she said, "Instruct us, wise one."

"Thank you," said Kedrigern, returning the bow. "The first thing to do is get out of here before we drown under all this melting ice."

"How shall we do that?" a bejeweled lady asked.

"The same way we got out of our showcases."

Drawing the vial from his belt, he started for the far end of the hall. Loud sloshing and a sudden outcry at his back made him turn, and he saw a great golden-green dragon arching its neck and switching its tail, causing waves of chilly water to curl across the hall as it approached them.

"Dragon! Fire-drake! Great worm! Let us slay the monster!" cried the Viking in the horned helmet, raising his ax.

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" Kedrigern commanded. "Lower that ax. The dragon is a prisoner, same as we are. If we start quarreling among ourselves we may never get out of here." Turning to the dragon, he said,

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"You'll have to behave yourself, too, if you — Fingard! How did you get here?"

"Fingard was fooled by frost giant's flummery,
Talk of treasure-horde, free for the taking,
Heaps of gold, gleaming goblets, all unguarded
In frozen fastness. Foolish Fingard
Fell for fable, followed freely,"

rumbled the dragon. He looked about in some embarrassment, then lowered his great spear-shaped head and added,

"Wizard again is good to Fingard,
Decent to dragon despite dumb decision.
Fingard appreciates, awaits instructions,
Happy to help get hostages home."

"Friend of yours?" asked the Viking, looking perplexed.

"I removed an arrow from his claw some years ago. He's behaved very well ever since." Turning to the dragon, Kedrigern said, "That's the spirit, Fingard. And I expect the same cooperation from everyone here. Now, about the doors...."

He started toward them once again. When he was a dozen paces away, they suddenly burst open and Harmr appeared in the opening, filling it completely. He no longer looked fully human. He had swollen to giant size and added some repellent and fearsome features: tusks curled upward and downward from his elongated mouth; his head was flattened and broadened, his brow a great bony ridge topped by bristling horns; talons sprang from his fingertips and toes, and spurs from his heels. He roared in rage, foaming unattractively at the mouth, and thrust up his arms so his talons rent the clouds. Then he stooped until his elbows touched the floor of the hall and his great ugly head was level with Kedrigern's. He pointed one glittering talon at the wizard.

"You! You have done this! You have stolen my collection of fine things and ruined my palace with your cheap mortal magic! But now I wield the ancient runes of Ymir and the first ones, a power that nothing you do or say can withstand! *'Frost will freeze you, ice will seize you, icicle's dart will pierce your heart, rivers of sleet will chill your feet, hands like stones will — '"*

Without warning, his hand shot out and closed on Kedrigern. Startled,

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the wizard dropped the vial. It would have done him little good had he retained it; Harmr held his arms and legs in an adamantine grip, and pressed his great thumb hard against Kedrigern's mouth, silencing him. Unable to speak a spell or work magic with a gesture, he was helpless. Harmr rose to his full height, held his arm out the better to inspect his prisoner, and laughed very unpleasantly as he concluded the charm: "' — *Crush your bones.*' I will slowly squeeze you to jelly. And when that is done, I will see to my collection."

The cold of Harmr's grip began to penetrate Kedrigern's bones even before the giant began to squeeze. The wizard's efforts to free himself were fruitless; he could not move so much as a finger, or open his mouth to groan. Harmr was laughing heartily, savoring his enemy's plight.

Through the thick clouds that filled these upper regions Kedrigern caught a glimpse of a dark form soaring up through the mist behind the giant's back. Swift as a hawk's flight Fingard circled Harmr's head, and as he passed before his face, Princess, kneeling on the dragon's back, threw something with a perfect sidearm pitch into Harmr's open mouth and sped on, spiraling down to safety.

The squeezing stopped. Harmr dropped the wizard and clutched at his throat. Before Kedrigern could stop chattering and shuddering sufficiently to work a soft landing spell, Fingard caught him with a claw and Princess at once set the Cap of Comfort on his head, saying, "You need this more than I do."

At once a comfortable warmth — not too much, not too little — spread throughout Kedrigern's body, soothing his aching bones. "Well done, my dear, whatever you did," he said.

"I threw the vial into his big mouth. I didn't think he'd like *that* very much."

"Fast and brilliant thinking. My thanks."

"Don't mention it," Princess said, taking his hand to help him aboard.

By the time they touched down, an alteration was apparent in the frost giant. His tusks and horns and talons had shrunk, and so had he. He laid a hand on his chest and another on his belly and groaned. "Warm. Hot!" he said, shrinking rapidly.

"It's going to get a lot warmer, Harmr. But maybe I can do something about that with my cheap mortal magic. First you must agree to repara-

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tions for all these people, and this dragon, and then talk about getting them home."

"Never! Never! Never!" cried Harmr, now down to about three times human size. Then he dropped to his knees, clutched his belly, and cried, "Yes, yes, yes! Now, now, now!"

"Very well. When you've shrunk down to our size, I'll put a retaining spell around the vial. A temporary one."

The woman in gold tapped him sharply on the shoulder. "Would it not be salutary, wise one, to let him suffer for a time?"

"A good long time," someone else said, and murmurs of agreement came from all around.

Kedrigern shook his head. "No doubt he deserves it, but the water is rising. It's very chilly in here, and some of us are not dressed for the occasion. I think it's in the best interest of all concerned if we arrange our departure as quickly as possible."

There was a brief silence, then a grudging chorus of assent. When Harmr, both hands wrapped around his belly, face contorted, howling in pain, was just at eye level, Kedrigern spoke the words of a spell that enclosed the vial within a bubble of magic. Harmr stopped groaning. A look of relief transfigured his sharp features. He gave a long sigh, and after drawing several deep breaths, said, "Oh, thank you, wizard. That's much better."

"Good. Now we can discuss compensation for all the inconvenience you've caused and arrange transportation to our various homes. As a shapechanger, you ought to be able to turn yourself into something big enough and fast enough to manage that promptly."

"What if he tries to trick us? I've been tricked once — " the richly dressed man started to complain, but Kedrigern cut him off.

"If our host tries any tricks at all, the spell will release the contents of the vial and he will go up in a puff of steam. Do you understand, Harmr?"

"Perfectly," said the chastened giant.

"All that remains is to divide up your treasure, and then we can be on our way."

Harmr turned even paler. "My treasure? All of it?"

"A small price to pay for what you've done to us," said Princess. Ominous noises from those assembled around her, and fists shaken in Harmr's direction, quickly silenced his complaints.

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"Yes, of course. Going-away presents," he said, and led the way to the chambers where his treasure lay heaped in a gleaming wet pile.

Distribution took surprisingly little time. With few exceptions, Harmr's former prisoners, while vindictive, were not greedy. A pocketful of rubies here, a sack of gold coins there, and they were satisfied to be on their way. Except for the wave-patterned sword and towering shield seized by the Viking, bulky items aroused little interest. And, too, they were in a hurry. The storm-castle had by this time come to resemble a slush-shanty. Icy water was sloshing about nearly knee-deep.

Once outside, Harmr obligingly transformed himself into a gigantic eagle. With grateful farewells to Kedrigern and Princess, the freed captives climbed to his broad back, settled snugly in among the feathers, and waved merrily as Harmr lifted off to revisit a variety of destinations.

"That turned out well," Kedrigern said as Harmr diminished swiftly to a speck in the distance.

"I think you should have been harder on him," Princess said.

"He's lost his castle, his collection, and most of his treasure, my dear. And the vial of witch's brew in his belly will force him to behave whether he wants to or not. He may even do some good in future days."

Princess gave him a long look. "I seem to recall that you once referred to me as 'soft-hearted.'"

"I'm not being soft-hearted. Harmr is the last frost giant left in the world. I'd hate to be responsible for the extinction of a species."

Princess gave a little sniff of disbelief, but said nothing.

"Fingard fares forth now, fast in flight
To far horizon, happily heading homeward.
Would wizard and wife and others with them
Like lift with their loot, avoiding some labor?
Saves sloppy slogging through snow and slush,"

said a deep rumbling voice close behind them.

"Well, we appreciate the offer, Fingard, but...." Kedrigern began, falling silent as he turned and saw Spot seated atop the dragon's neck and the great black stallion standing close beside his head. The horse nuzzled Fingard's scaly jowl and let out a whinny of pleasure and a happy snort of fire from his nostrils.

"You all seem to be getting on nicely together," said Kedrigern. "Spot

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gets along with everyone, but I had some doubts about the way my horse might react to a dragon."

"Tiny trolls no trouble to anyone,
And all fire-breathers are friends from far back.
Come, companions, climb aboard quickly.
Fingard misses family fiercely
And worthy work awaits wise wizard."

They boarded at once. Fingard unfurled his great wings with the sound of a thunderclap and hurtled forward and upward, out of the snow and slush, into the cloudless blue sky, heading for Silent Thunder Mountain.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

WE PROMISED YOU a new story from Paul J. McAuley a few months ago, then we failed to deliver. Well, next month we'll make good on that promise at last. (You knew we wouldn't let you down.) "Back Door Man" is the cover story for our March issue, and an interesting far-future exploration of the Net it is. Look out for this one.

Also due in next month is a novelette by our former editor, Kristine Kathryn Rusch. "The Women of Whale Rock" probably owes something of its origins to the fact that Kris is now living on the coast of the Pacific. It's a tale of mermaids, but these women of the sea aren't like any you've encountered before.

In issues to come, we're also planning to bring you new stories by Rob Chilson, R. Garcia y Robertson, and Robert Reed (that's Rob, Rod, and Bob), Laurel Winter, Rick Wilber, Michael Bishop, and many many more.

We're also gearing up now for our humongous Fiftieth Anniversary Issue—it's scarcely more than half a year away! As yet we cannot reveal all the contents of the issue, but we can promise you that we'll have a knockout new novelette by Ursula K. Le Guin in it to complement the Jonathan Carroll tale we've already mentioned. Watch this space for further updates regarding next year's biggest event. (Millennium? What's a millennium?)

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CURIOSITIES

THE LIGHTS IN THE SKY ARE STARS BY FREDRIC BROWN (1953)

I LOVE USED bookstores in fly-over country. You make discoveries there which are often impossible in our coastal metropolii.

What I did not want: A bloated modern "novel" fat on gratuitous wordage and slim on plot; lines of overfed type air-puffed by huge kerning and Double-Stuf leading, a book spine wider than half an inch, a story which existed only to terminate a contract.

I found Fred Brown's *The Lights in the Sky Are Stars*. Ironic, because Brown was a penny-per-word pulpist in the purest sense, writing disposable escapism with an in-print half-life of about six months. Brown remains famous for his short fiction and his humorous work; this was neither.

Lights has a sense of wonder rarely found in the arid punk tech of modern sci-fi, a kind of blazing, American hopefulness only possible when space was still an unconquered frontier. Its plot is queerly similar to the recent film *Gattaca*, only peopled with real humans instead of mannequin-like actors, the foremost of these being the compellingly driven Max Andrews, a guy who is so overwhelmingly normal, and so damned *modest* in the pursuit of his dream — to pilot the first flight to Jupiter on a ship he helped build — that you wish the frustrating bureaucracy which denies his quest (because he's too old) would just grow up, already, and give this well-qualified, deserving Everyguy his shot.

Because of the lean, declarative nature of his prose, and his penchant for writing proto-hardboiled fiction before *noir* was a genre, Brown could easily be rediscovered amid today's hype-addicted fetishization of styles past if only he could be re-christened, appropriately, the James M. Cain of science fiction.

—David J. Schow

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SPECULATIONS

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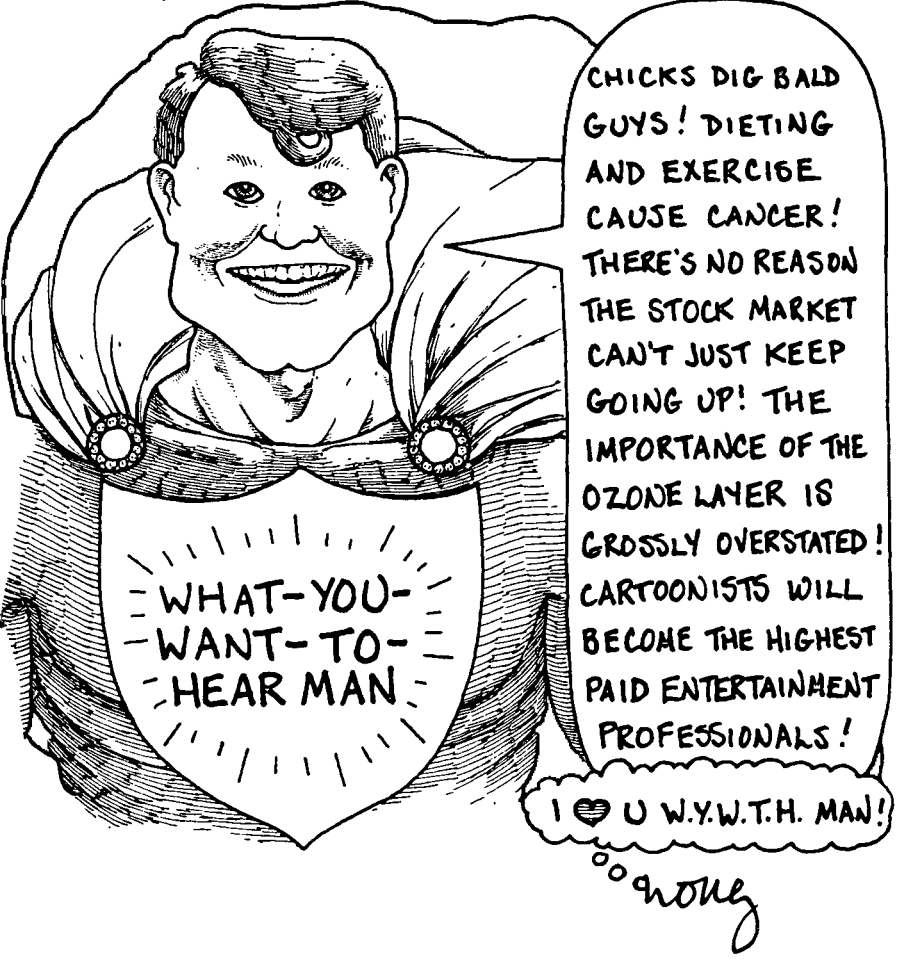
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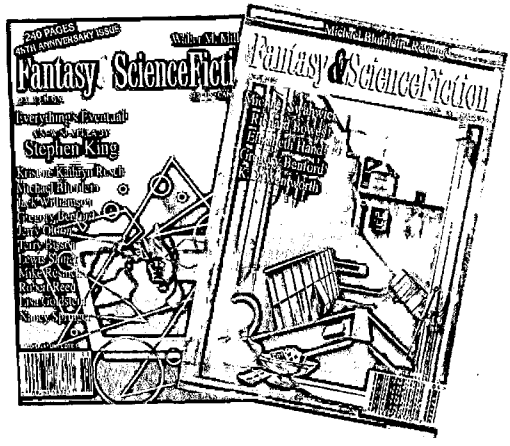

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